COMICS & GAMING MAGAZINE

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DIABLO III

TO HELL AND BACK

A HISTORY OF SANCTUARY

DIGITAL EXTREMES

INTERVIEW WITH SUDA51

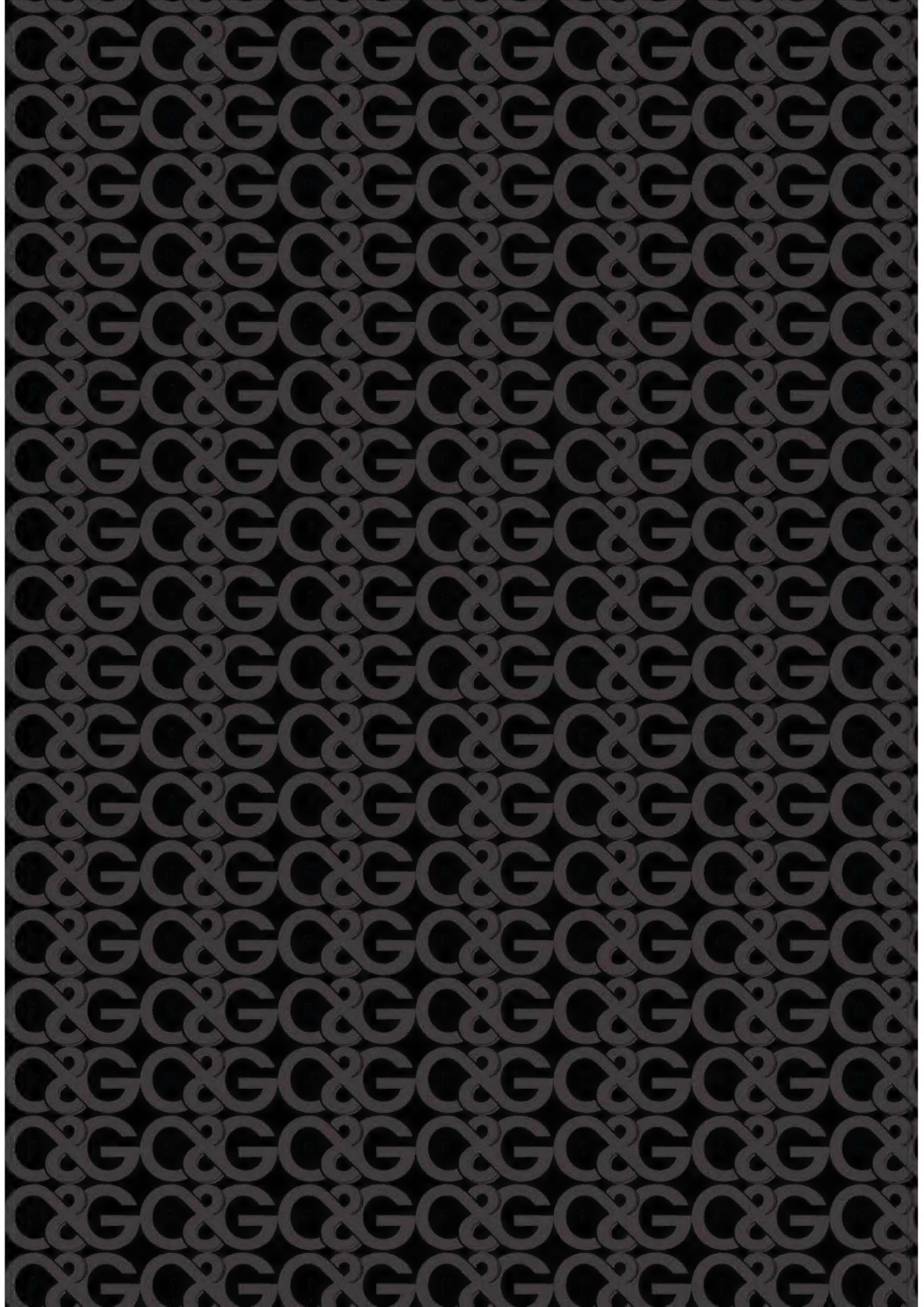
REVIEWS

MAX PAYNE 3

GHOST RECON: FUTURE SOLDIER

LOLLIPOP CHAINSAW

GENUINE CANADIAN MAGAZINE



And That's All She Wrote

For gamers, this big news in recent months is, of course, E3. Every year in the month of June, the Electronic Entertainment Expo tears through Los Angeles for three days, and in that time, the publishers and developers try to drum up excitement in both journalists and retailers for the product coming over the next year. The 2012 E3 was no different in this regard, except that it failed to drum up that excitement in the way that the industry players might have hoped. We're not off to a great summer start here. The thing is, this is a time of hibernation for the Big Three. Nintendo is gearing up for the launch of the somewhat confusing Wii U, and it's pretty clear from their E3 press conference that they have a lot of marketing to do. The public is not entirely sure what the Wii U is or why they want it, which is a dangerous place for new hardware to be when just months from launching. Sony and Microsoft, on the other hand, are still hip deep in developing the next generation of consoles, while trying to come up with enough reasons (ie, read games) to keep the current generation of hardware still profitable. This kind of divided attention usually signals a quieter, potentially less satisfying E3 and that's exactly what we got.

On the other hand, if you're a fan of comics, things are really shaping up for the summer. The San Diego Comic-Con will drop its usual bombshells for the faithful. Canada itself is gearing up for its own events, like Fan Expo in Toronto. And of course, comic fans already got hit with one great comic book movie in the form of *The Avengers*. It's hard to imagine that Christopher Nolan's final *Batman* movie is going to fail catastrophically.

This, I think, is a perfect example of why you shouldn't lay all your geek eggs in one basket. For someone who is only into gaming, the beginning of summer heralds a low point. If your interests are more varied, there are plenty of things to keep you enthused.

Even if you decide you've only got time for one specific hobby, it's best to diversify between genres just to keep things fresh. For example, this issue's cover makes it pretty damn obvious that even if the console line up is a little sparse, this is one of the best times to be a PC gamer. *Diablo III* is finally here, we've got a lot of coverage about the game for seasoned veterans curious about how the newest title stacks up, and newbies who might have heard the name in passing but aren't sure they want to wade through two games from the 90s to get up to speed on the story. We've also got the latest and greatest from the endearingly bizarre Suda51, as he graces this issue with an interview to complement the review of *Lollipop Chainsaw*. And let's not forget the analysis of the E3 that has come and gone, as well a preview with what is—to me personally—one of the big ticket games of the year, *Borderlands 2*.

As we head into summer, it's time to start wrapping things up and getting ready to enjoy the—hopefully—slower pace. We don't have to be playing new games every week, and even if we do, there are plenty of older games that might have been missed the first time around that deserve some summer playtime. So sit back, relax, and break out your controller or digital device of choice to read or play something and while away the heat. Summer's here, and it's gonna' be hot.

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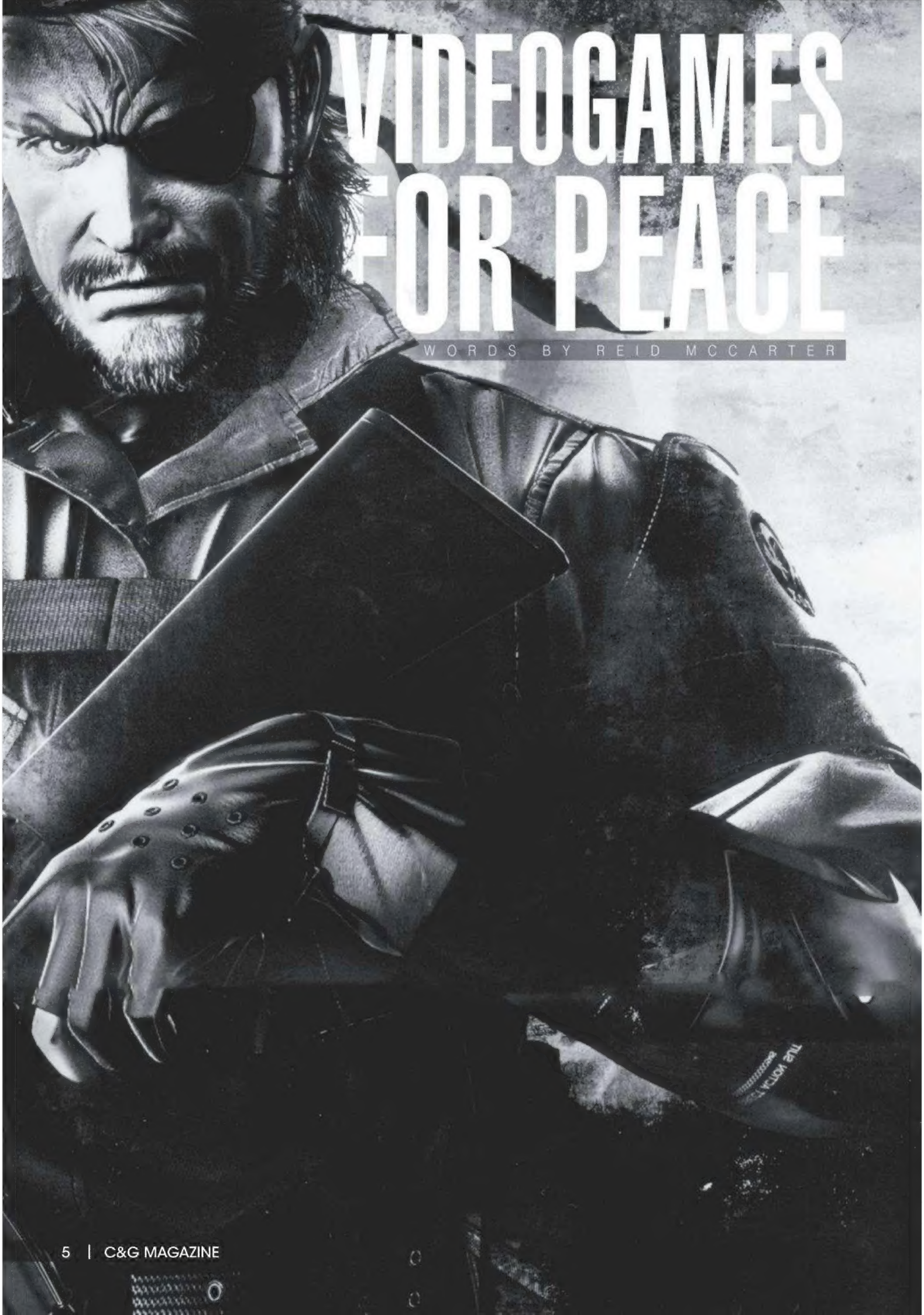


VIDEOGAMES FOR PEACE

WORDS BY REID MCCARTER

Think about the last two or three games you played and how you went about accomplishing your objectives in them. For me, this list would include *Saint's Row 3*, *Max Payne 3* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (nice symmetry there). Each of the games listed above, despite being an open-world action game, third-person and first-person shooter respectively, all share a common thread: they feature violence as their main gameplay mechanic. A random sampling of another three games would probably show the same thing.

Throughout the history of videogames, violence has always served as a go-to design element for developers working outside of the sports, racing and rhythm game genres. This isn't too surprising – confronting and killing an enemy is an objective that everyone understands as a (probably regrettable) part of our human nature – but doesn't mean that violent gameplay should be as prevalent as it is. Most arguments on this subject seem to boil down to whether or not videogames should even be allowed to feature violence (think of the children!), but this is not a cry for pacifism in games. Adults should be able to play videogames that tackle all facets of life because, after all, the medium is an emerging art form capable of discussing many different subjects in any number of ways.

Where the concern lies is in just how prevalent – and thoughtless – the use of violence is in game mechanics.

Uncharted and Violence Disconnect

In the *Uncharted* games, players take on the role of Nathan Drake, an affable treasure hunter who, by virtue of good humoured writing and Nolan North's charismatic acting, is meant to be someone we really like. Naughty Dog, the series' developer, pulls this off. The audience roots for Drake at his darkest moments, hopes for him to overcome his opponents and, ultimately, find a happy ending with his business partner and love interest. In other words, most players (myself included) really like Nathan Drake . . . despite the fact that he's a mass-murderer.

The *Uncharted* series makes up some of my favourite games of this console generation, but from the second entry onward, it's been pretty clear that they suffer from a problem most likely bred initially from a lack of forethought. Naughty Dog probably wanted to couple the games' traversal and puzzle-solving mechanics with a more direct form of action and figured that gunplay was the answer. Considering that each of the *Uncharted* games runs at around eight to ten hours, though, the body count racked up by Drake during this time easily falls into the hundreds. Sure, his enemies are out to get him too, but he kills an awful lot of them during one of his adventures without seeming to think too much of it.

The end of the second game sees primary antagonist Zoran Lazarevic even goading Drake about just this, telling him that he's just as much of a monster as himself – the sadistic war criminal he's attempting to defeat. Despite this nod to the problem they'd created, Naughty Dog's third *Uncharted* title plays exactly the same as the first two. In *Drake's Deception* the player must still try to reconcile the likable character with his homicidal impulses.

This type of disconnect highlights the main problem of modern videogame violence – the fact that deadly combat is often seen as a traditional game mechanic rather than one that should be questioned before it's implemented.

A Sense of Responsibility

Uncharted, of course, isn't the only game that suffers from the problem of thoughtless violence – *Grand Theft Auto IV* was plagued by a similar problem when its underdog character Niko slaughtered thousands of Liberty City residents while bemoaning his past as a soldier who committed atrocities during war – but it's use of a truly likeable protagonist just makes it more apparent than in other titles. Though it would seem like there's no answer to this common problem but to cut violence out of videogames entirely that type of solution isn't realistic. People enjoy firing virtual guns and portrayals of combat will always find an enthusiastic audience.

How can serious-minded action videogames hope to do better then ?

The answer comes with the idea of consequence. When a person dies it shouldn't be as clean as a vanished body or the elimination of incoming gunfire: it should have some degree of weight to it. In the vast majority of games killing goes unquestioned. An enemy position in *Call of Duty* is raining fire on the player so they call in an air-strike and, after a bombing run, that threat is extinguished cleanly and without any implication of the very real cost of the tactical maneuver.

A level of horror would better demonstrate the end result of combat. It would be difficult to stomach guiding a playable character past a moaning, wounded opponent or through a gore-soaked battlefield, but having to face up to the cost of violence is the only way to impart its real meaning. Someone who has never had the misfortune of experiencing – or seeing – an awful car accident will only think of the consequences of cutting another highway driver off in the abstract. Knowing the potential consequence of our decisions informs our behaviour. Videogames without realistically depicted violence lead not only to a disconnect between narrative and gameplay (*Uncharted*), but also to a mindset that sanitizes violence, thereby diminishing its impact.

Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker

From *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* onward, Kojima Productions introduced graphic violence to their series. Instead of a quick spray of red, the developers decided to accurately (or as accurately as possible at the time) depict the bloody result of dispatching an enemy guard. It isn't a coincidence that *Sons of Liberty* was also the first entry in the series where it was possible to play through the entire campaign without killing a single enemy. The games presented a choice: kill someone and witness a messy death sequence or knock them unconscious and avoid having to experience the unpleasantness of the more violent option. This dichotomy between pacifism and violence was echoed in the final score assigned to *Metal Gear Solid* players. The best rank that could be achieved in the games was measured in typical game criteria like playtime and the number of continues used, but also awarded players who set off the lowest number of alarms and killed as few guards as possible.

Unarmed Design

Metal Gear Solid's pacifist runs represent some of the best examples of how to present violence in action games. Kojima Productions' story needed to have combat mechanics — the games are military-centred and conflict lies at their thematic core — but approached this gameplay element with thought. This level of responsibility allowed the developers to retain combat as a mechanic, while bloodless playthroughs were still not only possible, but actively encouraged. But, what if an action-focused game was designed without violence at all?

One of the major problems plaguing the mainstream videogame industry is a lack of diversity. Players complained loudly when the current console generation's early catalogue relied so heavily on brown and grey colour palettes and this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3 2012) was vocally decried for featuring too many same-y first-person military shooters. Why, then, aren't more players agitating for mainstream games that stray from violent mechanics, the most prevalent gameplay choice in the industry?

The past few years have seen some critically and commercially successful games take this path, usually being lauded for doing so in the process, but they're still in the minority. Valve's *Portal* — a game played from the familiar first-person perspective, featuring a gun, but focused entirely on puzzle solving instead of combat — was a revelation at the time of its 2007 release and, strangely, remains (along with its 2011 sequel) one of the only mainstream action titles to take a common videogame genre and turn it on its head with non-traditional objectives and mechanics.

The more common fate of a big-budget game that attempts a pacific style of play is one of compromise. One of the most notable examples is *Mirror's Edge*, a first-person game from EA Digital Illusions CE (DICE) with parkour running as its main mechanic. Despite the

promise of the title's concept, the free-running gameplay was frequently interrupted with hackneyed combat sequences where the protagonist was pushed into badly paced gunfighting sequences that seemed as if they had been unnaturally wedged into a style of play that didn't accommodate their presence. An otherwise interesting premise was marred by the inclusion of violent mechanics in what can only be assumed as a feature that made *Mirror's Edge* more palatable as a "traditional" game.

It would seem, then, that no real innovation is possible in action games – that violence will always just be a part of this (most popular) videogame genre. This way of thinking says that non-violent mechanics should be confined to simulation, racing, rhythm and sports games with some puzzlers and adventure titles on the side.

Diversity and the Health of a Medium

The prevalence of violence in mainstream action games may slip in time, though. Indie developers continue to influence the industry in a major way, pushing the medium to new places and satisfying the need for videogames to break away from an overreliance on typical mechanics. The crossover appeal of thatgamecompany's Sony-backed exploration adventure *Journey* and the viral success of Frictional Games' terrifying *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* both show that it isn't just a fringe group of players who want to experience atypical gameplay – it's a large segment of the audience.

The experimentation that occurs below the mainstream of any medium has a habit of influencing more prominent creators. It doesn't seem like much of a stretch to imagine that the independent developers bringing non-violent mechanics to typically violent genres in an attempt at innovation will find echoes of their work creeping into the industry's biggest releases over time.

That's as it should be. Videogames don't have to be violent as a matter of course. It's only a matter of overreliance on familiar mechanics that have brought the medium to its current, killing-obsessed state. Upcoming big budget releases like *The Last of Us* and the *Tomb Raider* reboot appear to have taken note of the problems presented by consequence-free violence and offered combat situations that possess a dreadful weight. In their shotgun blasts to the face and rebar impaling these games counter the usual tropes of regenerating health bars and sanitized warfare. *The Last of Us*, in particular, seems to have been created in direct response to the disconnect between Nathan Drake's likeability and homicidal behaviour.

If these games follow through with what they've shown so far, they could very well help to catalyze a change in how developers approach violence. More impactful combat mechanics, coupled with continued innovation in action gameplay objectives, could lead to a sea change, helping an industry to more responsibly portray violence if it must be included in game design at all. C&G

The Last of Us

E3 2012

The Year of Safety

Words by: Wayne Santos

If E3 can be thought of as a preview of Christmas, then this year's E3 could best be described as the holiday in which players only got gifts from distant relatives; the presents were utilitarian and almost practical, like socks. Sure you don't' want to be an ingrate and criticize a gift from someone, but really... socks? That's it?

It's quite understandable from a business sense. After all, we're now almost seven years into the current console generation. That's practically an epoch in technology terms and the processing power of even mid-range computers today outstrips what the available consoles are capable of. In order for the big hardware manufacturers to stay relevant, it's time to start looking at the future and ushering in a new generation of consoles. As a result, 2012 is a year when most of the real work is going on behind closed doors; manufacturers are finalizing the specifications of their new machines, developers are coming to grips with the incoming technology, formulating new engines and conceptualizing new games. It's a time when no one—except maybe Nintendo—really needs to go all out for an E3 presentation because next year is the one that all eyes will be watching. With that kind of thinking in mind, it's no wonder then that E3 2012 ended up being a quieter, less impressive event than most. We're looking at a calm before the storm.

Microsoft

Microsoft is in a very comfortable position right now, and unfortunately they know it. Like Sony before them, their current position as the #1 console has made them complacent and we saw that in a big way at this year's E3. They have essentially "won" this console generation in these later years, and, victory in hand, no longer view either Sony or Nintendo as threats.

This explains why so much of their E3 press conference seemed geared towards attacking Apple.

That doesn't mean that Microsoft ignored their audience of hardcore gamers, they just didn't focus on them. In some ways, the 2012 press conference was like a repeat of last year's with a minor variation; rather than focusing on Kinect and casual audiences, they were focusing on services and their usefulness to everyone in the household. The sports fans were catered to with announcements of the NBA and NHL offering broadcast services later in the year. Paramount, Nickelodeon and other networks will also be bringing their content to the 360. Zune is going to be replaced with Xbox Music, and a library of over 30 million tracks. All of this is wrapped up in a *Star Trek*-style bowtie of greater Kinect voice recognition so it will be easier than ever for people to use the Xbox 360 as the central entertainment device in the living room, rather than a game console. Perhaps most interesting of all, these new additions won't be limited to just the Xbox 360, but can be accessed via tablet thanks to Xbox SmartGlass, a new initiative that will allow content to be viewed, paused, transferred and continued on other devices. One look at all the new additions that Microsoft is bringing and it's really obvious that Bill Gate's early dreams of a Microsoft product being the heart of the living room are finally coming true.

Oh, and somewhere in there, *Halo*, *Forza* and *Gears of War* are all getting new sequels.

In one sense, this press conference felt less like an Xbox 360 presentation and more like a Microsoft presentation of the sort that would normally occur at the Consumer Electronics Show or some other general technology event. Microsoft brought out the hardcore games, grudgingly, but it was their emphasis on Kinect and the plethora of new services coming that really

drove home the message; they consider the war for gamers over and won. They want everyone else now. That's not good news for gamers, but for others looking for an affordable, all-in-one entertainment solution to put into their living room, these new additions to the 360 might be the answer they're looking for.

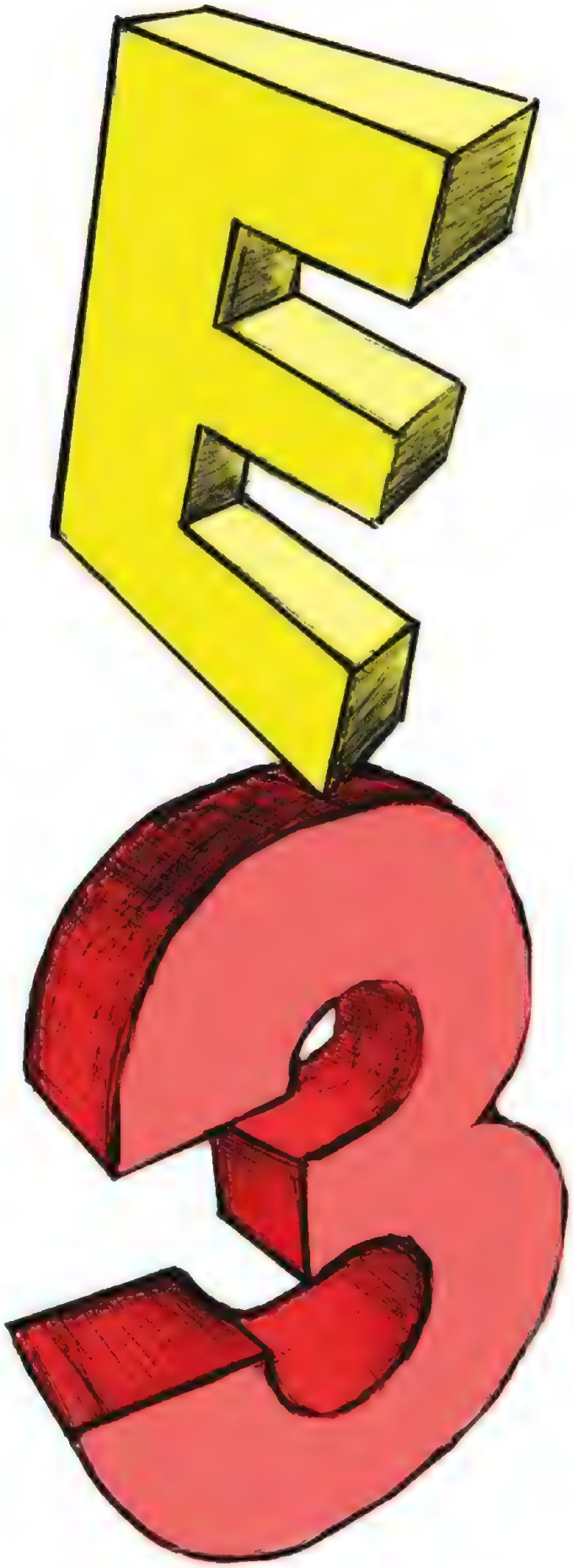
Sony

Of the Big Three console manufacturers that presented at this year's E3, Sony is the one that is perhaps closest to being called the winner, and that's only because their conference was the least disappointing. Having stumbled in recent years with their forays into motion control with Move and an emphasis on 3D gaming, Sony finally got it together to talk (mostly) about games this year.

Things got off to a good start with David Cage rolling out *Beyond: Two Souls*. Cage's latest interactive/cinematic project was a pretty startling demonstration of facial capture technology that works as well as what *LA Noire* accomplished without imploding an entire studio in the process. They kept up the momentum with a broad spectrum of different genres, like *PlayStation All Stars Battle Royale*, and expected sequels like *God of War: Ascension*.

That momentum was quickly lost when Sony tried to prove they also had something up their sleeve "for the kids." Wonderbook, an augmented reality initiative that uses the Move system and oversize storybooks scanned by the PlayStation Eye camera, was a disastrous centerpiece for the conference, running far too long. It also had the misfortune to glitch in the middle of the demonstration, with one user's gestures not being properly interpreted by the Move system, requiring multiple retries. The concept itself is sound enough; use AR techniques to make reading a more interactive experience for children. But this kind of demonstration is, again, more appropriate to the CES rather than an event focused on gaming. Admittedly, it's a good thing for Sony to broaden its range, and an even more impressive thing that J.K. Rowling of *Harry Potter* fame has agreed to participate, but it wasn't wise to make a failing demo a central pillar of the presentation.

Things got back on track with *The Last of Us*, and a quick, decisive, brutal showing, but there were a lot of surprising omissions in Sony's conference. The Vita is not selling well, and yet aside from a quick show of a new *Assassin's Creed* game, there was very little evidence to show Sony's support for the struggling portable. A lot of exclusives like *The Last Guardian*, *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* and *The Agent* were also conspicuously absent and with time running out on Sony's current hardware, it starts to put the fate of these games in doubt.



Nintendo

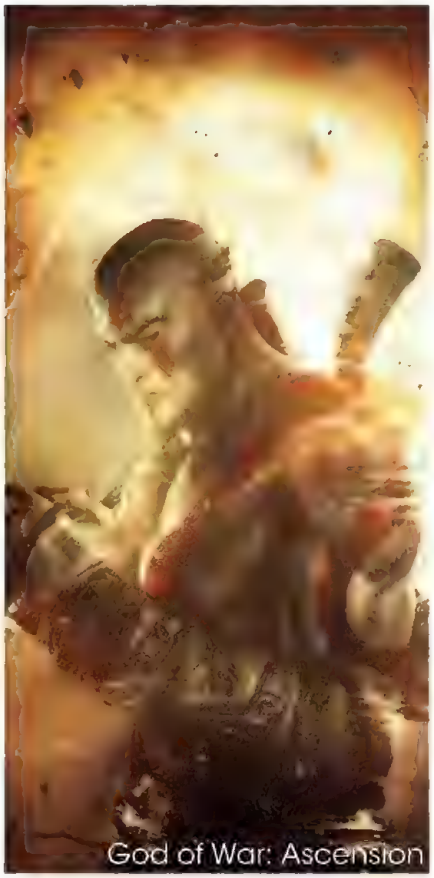
Finally, we come to perhaps the most disappointing press conference of all. This should have been an easy win for Nintendo, as they were the only ones actually launching new hardware this year. Instead, they managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory with the weakest presentation of all.

The speculation about the power and versatility of the new console, the Wii U, is now in full swing, and what was revealed so far wasn't all that promising. In a concession to "traditional," hardcore gaming, Nintendo announced the release of a "pro" gamepad that looks like a hybrid between an Xbox and Sony controller. This is an obvious, unspoken retraction of the Wii's focus largely on casual audiences, which resulted in very few high profile third party titles making the jump to the console. There was also a lacklustre announcement that games like *Batman: Arkham City*, *Mass Effect 3* and *Ninja Gaiden 3: Razor's Edge* are among quite a few already released titles that are making their delayed way to the Wii U. When some of the big news for a new console is that older games are coming to it, you know there's trouble.

But of course, there's Miyamoto. Instead of wowing the crowd with more an appearances by Mario or Link, he brought us *Pikmin 3*, which, despite its debut on new hardware, looks an awful lot like past *Pikmin* games. There's also going to be a new *Super Mario Bros U*, but, like *Pikmin 3*, this more traditional, side-scrolling iteration of the series doesn't really give us an idea of what this console can do. That was actually a running theme throughout the press conference, with Reggie Fils-Aime and the rest of the Nintendo regulars keeping the specs and capabilities of the Wii U under lock and key. We know that more than one of the new tablet style controllers can be used with the console, and we know it's going to have many games—like *Aliens: Colonial Marines*—that will take advantage of the secondary screen on the controller. There's still a lot that's unclear about how integrated this new controller is, how powerful the console itself is and the full range of its functionality.

Even as those questions continued to linger throughout the press conference, Nintendo continued its stream of more casual, family friendly software. The likes of a new *Wii Fit U* and a successor to *Wii Sports*, dubbed *Nintendo Land* were given heavy emphasis, so it's clear that Nintendo is still trying to prioritize the casual audiences that made the Wii such a monster success early in this console generation. Unfortunately, with new, potentially more powerful hardware coming from both Microsoft and Sony in the near future, Nintendo's bid to try and regain the trust of hardcore gamers may be futile when their new console—at first glance—seems no more powerful than current hardware.

That, then, was E3 2012 from the hardware manufacturers that drive the console industry. None of them had a uniformly strong presentation, though Sony came out the least unflattering. If any press conference could be said to have "won" E3, that award would probably go to Ubisoft, who had a strong showing of established franchises, and the surprise debut of *Watch Dogs*, an intriguing shooting/hacking action game that no one had seen coming. C&G


God of War: Ascension

Watch Dogs

ZombiU

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GENUINE CANADIAN MAGAZINE

KILL

Return to PANDORA

With Creative Director of *Boarderlands 2*, Paul Hellquist

Words by: Tim Ashdown

Paul Hellquist is off to a great start as a videogame designer. He began his career as a level designer at Irrational Games where he worked on acclaimed titles like *SWAT 4* and *Bioshock*. He eventually worked his way up to the position of lead designer at Irrational. In 2008 he landed at Gearbox Software and began to work on a little title called *Borderlands*. Now he's directing one of the most anticipated titles of the year, *Borderlands 2*. I caught up with the creative director while attending PAX East this past April and we talked about some of the new characters, environments and other surprises gamers can expect from *Borderlands 2*.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: There were only two playable classes in this demo, the Siren and the Gunzerker but tell me about Zer0, he's shrouded in mystery. Can you tell me how different he's going to play from Mordecai in the first game?

Paul Hellquist: He's our assassin character and it's funny that you say "he's shrouded in mystery" because that is his character. He's supposed to be the mysterious one of the four. We tried to think of what are the different ways that assassins do their business and we came up with two core things. There's the sort of Lee Harvey Oswald guy who's the sniper of course and then you got the up close and personal stab them in the back kind of guy. So we decided to make it so that you can play Zer0 as an extremely long range assassin or you can play him as an up close and personal type of assassin. Depending on which skills and which trees you focus on in his skill tree you can play him in very different ways.

CGM: Will we see the Bloodwing return in *Borderlands 2*?

PH: Not as a skill, no.

CGM: So you can't send your bird in and steal other people's kills?

PH: [Laughs] No. Zer0's skill is called "deception" and what he does is he tosses out this little hologram projector that creates a decoy of himself that keeps the enemies occupied on that decoy. He then goes into a *Predator* style stealth mode where he can sneak around and get in close for those back-stabs and similar attacks or he can line up that perfect critical shot and finish enemies off with one head shot.

CGM: Let's talk about Maya, the Siren for a moment. I got a chance to try out the Phaselock ability. Is that the only thing that's going to set her apart from Lilith in the first game? Or does the Phaselock ability actually develop into something bigger?

PH: All of the character's primary abilities or action skills as we call them, grow as you spend your skill points. So, Phaselock starts out as the basic ability you saw today or depending how you might spend your skill points, you can add high damage type things, you can add additional abilities that allow her to lock multiple enemies. There's a lot of different directions that you can take it. You can take in more of cooperative direction where your team can get healing if you kill enemies while locked, or you can actually resurrect your co-op partners using it. That way you don't have to run up and take time to heal your co-op friend, you can just Phaselock them and resurrect.

You can confirm the ability to duel-wield rocket launchers?

Absolutely!

CGM: The other class that was playable in this demo is the Gunzerker. How is the Gunzerker different from the Soldier or Brick the Berzerker from the first game?

PH: The Gunzerker is much less about tactical play and placement of a turret or anything. Salvador just whips out two guns of any type that he wishes and literally goes in guns blazing. In *Borderlands 2* with the Gunzerking ability you can duel-wield any combination of the millions of weapons that are in the game.

CGM: So you can confirm the ability to duel-wield rocket launchers then?

PH: Absolutely! [Laughs]

CGM: What is the biggest change from *Borderlands 1* to *2*? What is different other than the new characters?

PH: I would probably say... variety. That's sort of been a key word for the development of the game. We wanted to add a lot more variety into the weapons, the way the weapons feel, the way the weapons look, the way the shields work, and the way the grenades work. Even the variety of different environments you visit is dramatically wider than it was before. The variety of the enemies you face and the variety of abilities that those enemies have when you're fighting them.

CGM: *Borderlands 2* will feature a new villain named Handsome Jack. What can you tell me about Handsome Jack?

PH: Handsome Jack is the charismatic leader of the Hyperion corporation and they've come to Pandora after the opening of the Vault to basically strip mine the planet for this element that the Vault released on Pandora called Eridium. People don't know where this element came from so they've attributed it to the opening of the Eridian Vault and the ancient alien race known as the Eridians. It's now the most valuable substance in the galaxy. So, Hyperion has come to Pandora to take all the Eridium and "civilize" the borderlands. Handsome Jack is the face of the corporation that will be a constant thorn in your side.

CGM: So are we still hunting for treasure?

PH: Yes. There are now rumors of a new vault and Jack is also looking for it because he figures that if Eridium came out of the last one who knows what's going to come out of this one. His plan is to basically use this new vault to wipe out all our friends from the first game and the "people" of Pandora.

CGM: I hear that characters like Brick and some of the other characters from the first game will be making an appearance in *Borderlands 2* as non-playable characters. Will anyone else from the first game be making an appearance?

PH: A lot of our favorites from the first game will be back. You'll see Scooter the mechanic and Markus the gun merchant is back, Dr. Zed, and we have a lot of new fun and exciting characters that weren't in the first game as well.

CGM: What was your inspiration for some the enemies and some of the new environments we're going to be seeing in *Borderlands 2*?

PH: We wanted to expand, we had a lot of deserts in the first game and that's really only a corner of Pandora. So, we wanted to get to some of the other areas and environments. We looked at a lot of arctic type stuff and we also looked at the Highlands of Scotland as an inspiration because it's still sort of barren and has a kind of wasteland feel but it has more colour, and different types of colour, darker rocks and green grasses and things like that.

CGM: What do you hope gamers get out of *Borderlands 2*?

PH: I hope that they are just entertained in areas that they weren't in the first game. A lot of what made *Borderlands* so addictive was the combat and the loot and that's all going to be there in spades but I think we can entertain in much more rich ways through our side missions. There's a lot more dialog content and a lot more funny context for the side missions. I think our main plot is really interesting and is where we're going to surprise people. So I'm excited for that part of gaming to become a more of part of *Borderlands 2*. CGG

Bigger, Badder, and Bazilliondier

Borderlands 2 Previewed

Words by: Tim Ashdown

It's bright and early on the first day of PAX East and as I stand in line to pick up my badge I have only one thought running through my mind, I gotta play *Borderlands 2*, gotta play *Borderlands 2*, gotta play *Borderlands 2*. At the front of the line they check my ID, tick my name off the list and calmly hand me my badge. I politely thank them and turn on my heel. I start by walking quickly, security tends to give you the business when you run. As I make my way past security and on to the PAX East show floor I have no time to be awestruck at the massive monument to gaming that is laid out before me. With security safely behind me I begin to sprint in the general direction of the 2K Games booth. Upon arrival I am greeted by a gigantic statue of our new crew of heroes. There's Maya, the Siren, Salvador, the Gunzerker, Axton, the Commando and the mysterious Zer0 all standing there in their cell shaded glory. But there's no time for stargazing I've got a game to play. As I line up for the demo stations I'm not only excited to be one of the first people to get their hands on the highly anticipated sequel to 2009's surprise smash hit but rather the fact that I get to tell all of you readers out there about it too. It's time we were re-introduced to the mystical, violent, and twisted world known as Pandora.

Bigger and Badder

Gearbox and 2K have a lot riding on this title. The first *Borderlands* was a big surprise to critics and gamers alike as we were introduced to the Vault hunters and their quest for booty. This time millions of eyes are watching and millions of mouths are drooling for one of the most anticipated games of this year. My hands on demo of *Borderlands 2* lasted only 25 minutes but that was all I needed re-affirm my suspicions that this could be on of the biggest sequels ever. I'm not being figurative here, things are literally bigger. I started my demo in an area known as Caustic Caverns which is pretty obviously the inspiration and source for the game's acid based weaponry. Having found the Siren character, Lilith, from the first game not to be my cup of tea I decided to see if Maya, this new Siren, played any differently, I was glad I did. I found Maya's Phaselock ability to be a welcome change from the Phasewalk ability used by Lilith in the previous game. Mainly because I found it to be a lot more useful. Creative Director, Paul Hellquist told me that there are also some very co-op friendly options with the Phaselock ability, like ranged healing and health production. Since my time was limited with the demo I opted for a more combat centric approach. I put several of my 15 skill point into the immolation tree which augmented the Phaselock ability with fire. If gaming has taught me anything over the years it's that when in doubt, use fire. One aspect of the demo that was incredibly hard to ignore was the sheer size of the enemies, they're huge. While in Caustic Caverns I found myself fighting these gigantic crabs which were absolutely massive. I also enjoyed that in order to take out these crazy crustaceans you needed to target specific parts of their anatomy that were shielded. Once the crystal shielding had been chipped away I felt instant elation as I saw the words "Critical!" begin to float up from the wounds.

Bazilliondier

The first *Borderlands* featured many different varieties of the same enemy type. First you would fight Skags, then Adult Skags, then Badass Skags would start to appear as you advanced your character. I remember thinking to myself: "Where the hell are these things all coming from?" I may just get my answer in *Borderlands 2*. A feature of the enemies that I noticed was that they start out as their regular type and then go into a sort of cocoon. Thinking I was safe, at least for the time being, I then turned my attention to more immediate threats, big mistake. After a few moments the previously cocooned enemies emerged from the chrysalis to become advanced versions of that same enemy. That's right, enemies evolve. They can start out small but if left unchecked certain enemies will evolve into much more dangerous versions of their former selves. I thought that it was a nice touch

Borderlands is a difficult title to follow up to, but this new crew doesn't disappoint, and Pandora is as wild as ever.

to the game that made these natural beasts of Pandora a much more of an organic part of the world. Hellquist also told me that some times it maybe to the player's advantage to wait until these creatures evolved because the bigger they are, the better the loot, and isn't that what *Borderlands* is all about?

Before I knew it my time with the game was over and I had to give up the demo station to another player who was most likely jonesing as hard as I was to play, and if I didn't have an appointment with Hellquist to get to I might have attempted to persuade one of the people manning the booth to let me give the demo another go. After playing, I can say with all certainty that this is and should be one of every gamer's most anticipated titles of the year. The game looks great, and the scale of the enemies is nothing short of astounding. The controls are smooth and the pace is frantic, which is just how I like my shooters. I do wish I'd spent more looking over the skill tress but I didn't want to waste too much time just looking around and opted to get in more play time in lieu of checking out different skills. As Hellquist mentioned in my interview, variety was a key focus for the team. I saw so much during my playtime yet I walked away wanting more, much more. I see myself and many other fans loosing incredible amounts of time to *Borderlands 2* when it drops this September. I will say that without a doubt that this will be the go-to co-op experience for many gamers this fall. CG

Frontier of Development

An Interview With **Michael Schmalz** of Digital Extremes

Words by: Wayne Santos

These days when people talk about Unreal, the first thing that comes to mind is the current, most popular licensed graphics engine used in game development today. But what most people don't realize about Epic, the company that created the engine, was that in its humble beginnings, there is a core of Canadian inventiveness. Digital Extremes, a studio quietly sitting in London, Ontario, is currently hard at work on a new, co-op *Star Trek* game, but before that, they'd developed The *Darkness 2*, the multiplayer component of *Bioshock 2* and, back in the day, worked on a little game called *Unreal*. We got a chance to speak with the President of the company, Michael Schmalz to get some insight on one of the more important developers in Canada that somehow manages to stay out of the spotlight.

C & G Magazine: Take us back to the start of Digital Extremes.

Michael Schmalz: The company was founded by my brother, James Schmalz. It was incorporated in 1993. We started out making videogames in high-school.

CGM: What kind of hardware was being used in those days for these games?

MS: Oh, that was an 8088 processor, but even before that, James was programming his very first games on an Apple IIe. So yeah, one of his first big successes was a game called *Epic Pinball*, which he started programming as a student in high-school. He was doing a few other games with Epic, who was a shareware publisher at the time.

Things really started to get serious after he graduated, and Tim Sweeny [founder of Epic] came up to him and said "I'm dealing with this company in Europe that has an idea for a pinball game. I think it might be good if you give it a try." So James did, and that was the genesis of *Epic Pinball*.

So he did the first few tables and it was distributed to almost every PC via shareware. He really did it the hard way, because he wrote the whole thing in Machine language, and that was really hard to get. So he did all the art, all the coding, straight into Machine language, really hardcore stuff. I don't know why he did it that way, but it was absolutely brilliant, because back in that day, '93, '92, the optical discs were just coming out, your CD driver never worked, and buying a game was an ordeal of, "Do I have the right sound drivers on this?" You didn't have the internet, and things went wrong all the time. But writing in Machine language and it was all basically compiled and compressed as it was distributed... it fit on a 3 ½" floppy, and was able to disseminate. The first two tables went out, and here's the thing; no matter how weird, or bizarre, or new the system was, it didn't rely on the audio or video drivers, it just worked on everything.

That ended up having a retail version, people wrote in to Epic games for a mail order version, for all of the tables, and that went up to $130 back in the day. James was amazed that people were paying money to get this. And I think that sales were upwards of 200,000 paid copies.

So from then on, our relationship with our publisher, Epic, just continued. And one day, James just came in, after having written a few lines of code for this iterative engine, after looking at what ID was doing with *Wolfenstein*, which had just come out. And his was extraordinary because it was actually in 3D. And ultimately became the Unreal Engine. After that, he showed it to Epic, and that began the 10 year relationship that culminated in us doing *Unreal*, *Unreal Tournament*, *Unreal Championship*, *Unreal Tournament 2003* and *2004*.

They ended up taking over the technology, and Tim Sweeney's done amazing things with that. Mark Rein, in terms of marketing, has turned it into one of the eminent technologies.

CGM: Why did you decide to tough it out as a studio here in a small city like London, rather than going to Vancouver, Montreal or even Toronto?

MS: Well, that's the thing, it could be viewed as toughing it out, but getting back to why we're here in the first place... James and I were both University of Waterloo grads. When we first started the company, we were on the corner of Colombia and Albert street, in a building that is now owned by Research in Motion, and they were just a very small company just down the hall from us at that time. The thinking was, James had just graduated, he still had an apartment there in Waterloo, he hadn't done anything or moved anywhere. And we thought we could get some students to help out. That didn't work out; they didn't have the right skills and we didn't have the right resources to teach or mentor them, so that reason fell off the table pretty quick and the lease came due.

An upcoming untitled *Star Trek* game is Digital Extreme's next big project

Then *Unreal* went gold. Tim Sweeney and Cliff Bleszinski literally moved down to Waterloo to finish that game on the campus. After that, the lease came up, we were working on the next game and had a team of 10 or 15 people, and we found an awesome studio space at the end of Wonderland road in London. So it was basically by consensus, we asked "Who wants to move to London? To move into this really cool space?" Which is still there, by the way, it's a carpet factory warehouse now.

But, between 2000 and 2005, we did open a Toronto studio, because attracting talent to London was more difficult at that time. We thought that Toronto being more metropolitan, that would be a good business thing to do. But we quickly realized the cost of doing business in downtown Toronto was a lot. We did *Pariah* out of the Toronto office and we were working with a Canadian publisher on that. That was not one of our greatest games. And after that, we thought, "We need to combine teams again," so that we could start work on *Dark Sector*. Just the move from Toronto to London, we ended up losing half of that staff, because they were Toronto people. They loved their town.

CGM: Have you encountered any difficulty in attracting people to London because of its location? BioWare has said admitted that sometimes convincing people to move to Edmonton can be difficult.

MS: We always encounter that and that was one of the reasons we wanted to do DIG [Digital Interactive Game & Web Conference], is to just create additional pipelines and dialogue, to make sure that we reached talented people that we were overlooking. Getting talent is

What we want to do is make top-tier console games. Console games are where the eyes are, and we see consoles medium for doing the type of game that we're good at.

- Michael Schmalz
President of Digital Extremes

probably the videogame industry's greatest challenge. And there are a lot of really good people in this industry who are trained out of places like California and Boston, and other videogame centres around the world, that probably wouldn't consider moving to a small city like this, or Edmonton. You really have to be in Toronto, or Vancouver, or Montreal to get those people.

So it just makes us work harder, but I would say, from our perspective, it is a big, big issue. But things are different now. We're not going after 22 year olds who want to party every night. The allure of a place like Toronto or Vancouver really diminishes when you've got a two year-old and spouse, and you've gotta' take them on the subway. Here, everything is right at hand, the lifestyle is easy, and very family focused. A lot of people are married now, they're settled down and they want to own a house. In that case, London has tremendous advantages over places like Vancouver, where you'll never own a house, no matter how much money you make. [Laughs]

CGM: Moving onto the larger picture, what do you think of Canada's role in the industry?

MS: Canada is well-positioned, I think. Certainly Ontario with the tax credits and its support of digital media is really creating additional stability in our industry that allows companies like ours and Capybara to grow. Obviously, there's still a lot of turmoil and uncertainty with new platforms and business models that are really hard to plan for or predict. I think with the incentives that exist now, it gives you the space to try, and fail. And if one in ten make it, you've got 100 tries, instead of 20 tries because of this opportunity, you're going to have a great industry. I think that Vancouver benefited from that, certainly Montreal years and years ago. Now you've got very healthy third party, and QA and various consultancies and ancillary services to videogames and digital media established there, lots of little independent developers and the big ones are all there. It's a healthy ecosystem. I think Ontario is moving towards that point of maturity. And I hear [Canada] is now the third largest producer of games in the world. We're the largest per capita by far, and we're growing.

CGM: On the one hand, you've got a massive studio like BioWare with a staff of hundreds, and on the other hand, you've got Queasy Games, which is essentially just Jonathan Mak. Where does Digital Extremes fit in this spectrum?

MS: I've got so much respect for Jonathan Mak. He's been able to live the dream. Normally when you come out with your first hit, the immediate move is to scale up, hire more people, take the profits and try and make the next game bigger and better. He seems to have kept relatively small, working on a very successful... I wouldn't say recipe, but working with this talent, and that really... Looking at veteran videogame developers, they all look back at those small teams. Back when people seemed almost joined at the brain, and were so focused on making the game that nothing else mattered. Now there's more layers of bureaucracy.

So where does Digital Extremes fit into all of this? That's a good question, and I think what we want to do is make top-tier console games. Right now console games are where the eyes are, and we see consoles now and in the near future as the predominant medium for doing the type of game that we're good at, first person, third person action shooters. And those are the games that we want to play, the ones where you set aside time to play. You say, "I'm done dinner at seven o' clock, don't' bother me until I go to bed, I am playing *The Darkness 2*," or whatever, maybe *Star Trek* when that comes out. So those are games that will tell you amazing stories, that will draw you in, and you can lose yourself in them. That's our goal. From a business perspective, I think we're looking at being two teams. A team for these sorts of games is roughly between 80 and 100 people, for the various stages of making a console game over two years. We're looking at roughly one game a year.

We're as eager as anybody to see what happens with the next Xbox and PlayStation 4, what's going to be happening with online and digital distribution. For the near term, that's pretty much our plans. We're at a comfortable size, now that we've grown this last little while, and I see us just focusing on our company culture, making DE an amazing place to work at, and when you've got amazing people at an amazing studio, you will make amazing games.

CGM: Have you ever entertained the idea of branching out to another genre, or do you think you can do everything you want within the shooter?

MS: As long as we've got good options within our primary genre, which, as you say, are the action shooters, we will take those. And I think we have "plan b's", we just put *Retro Pinball* out to test that market place, and see first-hand how those dynamics go. We're always willing to experiment and we always have different opportunities we're willing to consider. But for us, the ones that are the most interesting, that our company wants to work on, are basically the big budget action shooters. Our technology, our expertise are all oriented towards those. So as long as we can be successful and sell those games, hopefully publishers will sign us up and we'll be able to keep making them.

I look at the last big transition we made, it was basically going from a PC developer to a console developer, and that required some big changes from us. The interface, the technology, even the idea of making a game—back in the day on PCs, that was on 15" CRT monitors—as opposed to the games we're making now that are meant to be played not at your desk, but in your living room, with a controller, on a 60" TV, in high res, as you're sitting on a couch, eight feet away from it. To us, it's a big difference.

CGM: What your thoughts about the state of industry? Between the fear of mobile apps devouring everything, and entire publishers moving things out of the way of *Call of Duty*, what do you think is happening in this business?

MS: In the console space, the middle has fallen out. It's a hit, sequel driven major big budget industry on the one end, and most of those really big budget games are first or second party games. Which makes it really difficult for companies, whereas there was lots of opportunity a few years ago, now there are less opportunities for us to make that "middle budget" console game. Publishers aren't giving *Uncharted* or *Skyrim* 60 to 80 million dollar budgets to independent developers. That's just way too risky, they're taking that in-house and building those teams in-house. So we, as independent developers, are stuck in a bit of a precarious spot. We try and fit in where the publishers are not finding it attractive, so that's one of the reasons why we have taken on things like the PC version of *Homefront*, or the PS3 port. That led us to bigger things that allowed us to work with publishers but that's the kind of work that developers need to consider. For us to be creative and only do half of a game—like with *Bioshock 2* where we just did the multiplayer half—I think those are opportunities that we should also take.

DEVELOPMENT PORTFOLIO
UNREAL // 1998
UNREAL TOURNAMENT // 1999
UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2003 // 2002
UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004 // 2004
PARIAH // 2005
DARK SECTOR // 2008
BIOSHOCK (PS3) // 2008
BIOSHOCK 2 (MULTIPLAYER) // 2010
HOMEFRONT (PC) // 2011
THE DARKNESS // 2012
STARTREK GAME // IN DEVELOPMENT

Ultimately, I'd like to start doing our own IP again, but, as you see this year, there's almost no new IP, at least not with the type of budget that we want. Everything is franchised. So, I think the PlayStation 4 is going to be an opportunity for new IP to emerge, and hopefully we'll start doing that. But in terms of where the industry is going, the console industry anyway, I see a transition towards the franchise blockbuster, or in some cases, the low end console stuff, the DLC, which is also an opportunity for us.

CGM: Finally, is there anything you can share with us about the upcoming *Star Trek* game?

MS: I can't tell you anything more than what's already been announced. All I can say is that this is a new opportunity for us, to work with the motion picture industry, which is extraordinary. Normally, by the time a movie is green-lit, there's just not enough time to make a game. You just look at every movie tie-in, we're not interested in being in that market. Other developers are, and will push out a game to monetise a movie IP that's coming out, to benefit from the marketing and all of that. For us, it's all about making a great game that will stand out. So I can say that the reason that we're involved is... not only are we tremendous *Star Trek* fans at DE, when the opportunity came, the first question we asked was "How much time do we have? When's the movie going to come out?" And when it became apparent to us that we had a full development cycle to do this, then our interest really perked up. It was a relationship that we pursued with Paramount to be that developer, and all I can say is, it's coming along extraordinarily well, I wish I could tell you more about it, it's super exciting. CGM

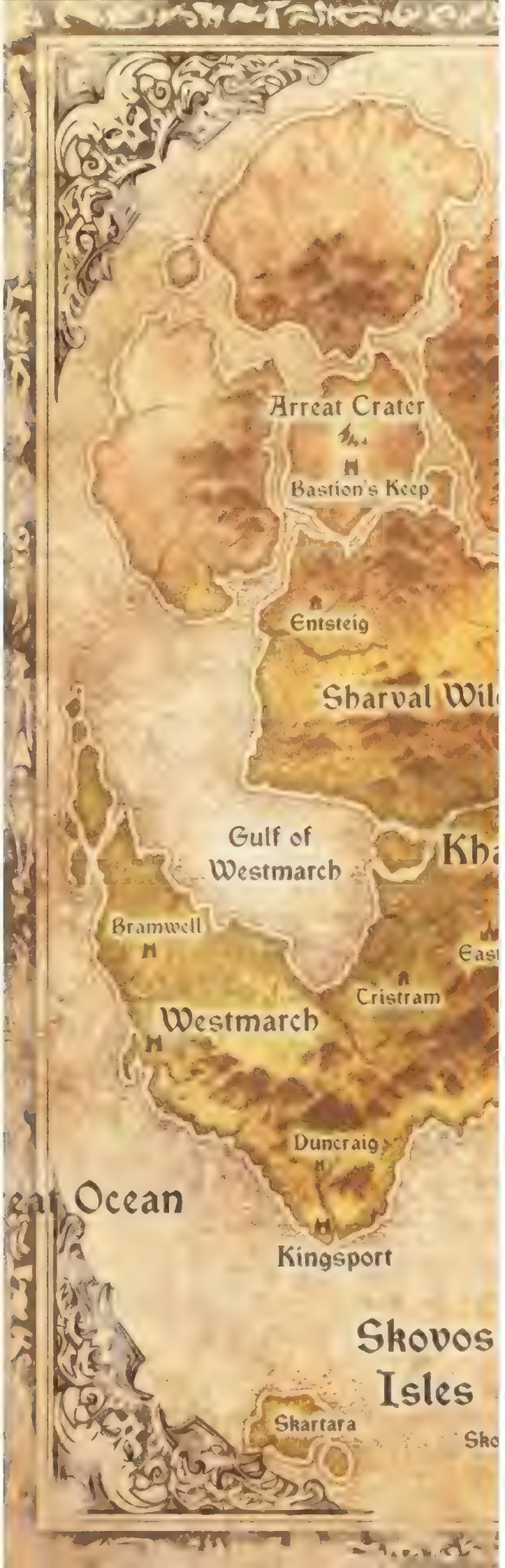
A history of Sanctuary

Words by: Brittany Vincent

Diablo has been the gold standard for loot-dropping, demon-felling entertainment ever since its release in 1996. Since then, gamers have been clamoring for more. Developers aside from Blizzard have been more than happy to deliver alternatives, but most end up only a shell of the game they're trying to imitate.

It's taken 12 years to release the third entry into the beloved series, *Diablo III*, and because of that lengthy in-between period, the heavy-hitter hasn't always been on everyone's minds. It's a swift return to form, rife with colourful new additions and the very same delectable slick gameplay we know and love, but in many ways it's a whole new beast to younger players.

We've got your guide to *Diablo*, past and present: what's changed, what stayed the same, and a look at the *Diablo* lore -- enough for new players to get acquainted, and plenty for seasoned players to walk away enriched as well. It's all you need to get started. All you need to do is sit down and get to gaming. We'll take it from here.



Xiansai
Scosglen
Túr Dúlra
Dreadlands
Ivgorod
Dry Steppes
Kehjistan
Caldeum
Lut Gholein
Gea Kul
Urch
Aranoch
Kurast
Swamplands
Twin Seas
Torajan Jungles
Viz-jun
Marshlands
Phillios
Lycander
Sanctuary

The World of Diablo

In the beginning of time as related to the *Diablo* universe, there was absolutely nothing except for a singular pearl. But this was no ordinary piece of finery. This particular pearl contained an omnipotent spirit known only as the One – Anu. The closest thing to God in the *Diablo* lore, Anu was made of sparkling, shining diamonds and comprised of all things good and pure – the entire physical spectrum. Of course, this also encompassed all things dark, evil, and unclean. Anu eventually began to consider itself, all parts of the same whole, and eventually sought to drive out all evil from itself.

Thus, Anu cast out all darkness, all impurities, and all that was unclean from its being, left with an unsullied whole. And what of the parts left to rot? All things dark, all things considerably impure? These parts met together to form Tathamet, a powerful dragon assembled via the unwanted pieces of Anu. The Dragon was comprised of all evil, and though it melded into a separate living being, Anu and Tathamet were locked in a millenia-long conflict within the original pearl from whence everything came.

And when the two powers were finally spent, exhausted, and unable to carry on their raging battle even one minute more, their final blows created such a powerful explosion of light and matter that the universe was brought into existence.

Darkness into Conflict

The death of the magnificent beings within the Pearl was responsible for creating key setpieces in the *Diablo* universe. Anu's spine formed the Crystal Arch and High Heavens. Tathamet's flesh formed the Burning Hells, and to counterbalance the massive amounts of evil and darkness permeating from such, the Eye of Anu formed a gigantic crystallized stone known only as the Worldstone.

From the Crystal Arch's creation after the death of Anu and Tathamet, many noteworthy events occurred. From the Crystal Arch, angels were spawned. From the seven heads of Tathamet, three Prime Evils and four Lesser Evils were brought to life. With two conflicting forces birthed from the same source, conflict was bound to break out. Thus, the Eternal Conflict begun, with the angels birthed from the Crystal Arch building the Pandemonium Fortress around the Worldstone in a bid to protect it from those who mean to control it.

But not all of those who participated in the seemingly never-ending conflict desired to stay locked in combat. Eventually, the angel Inarius decided that the Eternal Conflict itself was unjust and preferred to remove himself entirely. Along with a band of angels and demons who felt similarly, he stole the Worldstone to create the world of Sanctuary.

The World of Sanctuary

Within Sanctuary, angels and demons mated to create Nephalem -- Inarius and Lilith's children are an example. These beings would later be referred to as the Ancients, the race from which all humans would eventually come. But this seemingly peaceful time wasn't without its own complications. The angels and demons came to fear the power of the Nephalem and conspired to annihilate each and every last one of them as a precaution. This drove mother Lilith into a passionate rage -- who could harm her own children? In one fell swoop she murdered each and every one of the angels and demons who would dare harm her precious Nephalem.

Lilith's lover Inarius, taken aback by such brutish actions, banished Lilith from Sanctuary and into the mysterious Void, where she could be trapped for all eternity. Still, fearing the power of the Nephalem himself, Inarius sought to weaken their powers over the coming years by altering the power of the Worldstone.

The Sin War

Over the years the Nephalem with no remaining powers came together to form a civilization that thrived despite the evils around them, splitting into different clans of mages and specific groups. The Prime Evils, knowing the pursuit of knowledge and power by the inhabitants of Sanctuary could eventually become a threat, formed a corrupt organization known as the Triune Cult, in a bid to slowly poison humanity and all of its children. Inarius realized the Triune Cult could have adverse effects on his brethren, and in turn formed the Cathedral of Light in a bid to win back children lost to the Prime Evils. The creation of both organizations was a precursor to a battle that would be known as The Sin War.

As the Triune and Cathedral of Light cults battled for supremacy, Lilith returned and finagled a farmer from Sanctuary as a pawn to unlock his dormant Nephalem powers, all in a bid to get revenge against Inarius, who banished her to the Void. This resulted in the High Heavens' realization that the hidden world of Sanctuary existed, and their response was to invade with the intention of wiping every last inhabitant out. The Burning Hells were unleashed upon Sanctuary as well as those who inhabited them, as the land was meant to be used as a bargaining chip to destroy the forces of the Light.

The farmer Uldyssian caught in the crossfire between Lilith and Inarius eventually sacrificed himself to remove the forces of Heaven and Hell from Sanctuary, resulting in the whole of humanity losing their powers once more. Humanity was spared destruction, though Archangel Imperius desired their annihilation An agreement was reached between the High Heavens and Burning Hells to spare Sanctuary and let humanity make its own decisions. Mephisto, Lord of Hatred, and one of the Prime Evils, was given Inarius as a slave, to be tortured for the whole of eternity.

DIABLO TIMELINE

THE DAWN

The two gods Anu and Tathamet warred against each other within the known universe for countless millennia, until finally exhausted from the battle, they both delivered their final blows to each other.

High Heavens and Burning Hells Formed

In the aftermath of the battle, Anu's shining spine formed the Crystal Arch and all of the High Heavens and Tathamet's putrid flesh formed the Burning Hells.

THE DARK EXILE – 964

Led by Azmodan and Belial, many of the Hells' lesser demons rise up against the Prime Evils in a rebellion that culminates in the Dark Exile. Diablo, Mephisto, and Baal are exiled to Sanctuary from the Burning Hells

DIABLO I – 1263

In the events of Diablo I a lone hero rises against the possessed King Leoric. Diablo is deafeted by the hero, who then tries to contain the demon in his own body, but quickly loses control to the demon and leaves Tristram as the "Dark Wanderer."

Mesphisto and Baal are destroyed by the group of heroes in their pursuit of the Dark Wanderer

DIABLO II – 1264

In the events of Diablo II a group of heroes quest to beat Diablo and his brothers while following the Wanderer.

Diablo is defeated and his Soulstone is destroyed

KING LEORIC ARRIVES – 1262

The eastern lord Leoric comes to Tristram, declares himself king.

Leoric converts the old, long-unused Horadric monastery to a cathedral. His advisor, Archbishop Lazarus, secretly releases Diablo from imprisonment underneath.

King Leoric descends into madness as he struggles to resist Diablo's possession.

DIABLO IMPRISONED – 1019

Diablo is finally captured by a group of Horadrim monks led by Jered Cain. The monks bury Diablo's Soulstone near the river Talsande in Khanduras, and a Horadric monastery with a network of catacombs is built over the burial spot.

DIABLO III – 1285

The city of New Tristram is rocked by a meteorite crashing into its cathedral, which causes the dead to rise and leads into the beginning of Diablo III

Rebellion

With the Sin War behind them, the Burning Hells' lesser demons were still unsatisfied with their ranks, many years later. In an act of rebellion that eventually became known as the Dark Exile, demons Diablo, Mephisto, and Baal were exiled to Sanctuary to live. In a bid to combat the Three Prime Evils and protect humanity from the demons sent to live amongst them, the Horadrim was founded.

The Horadrim was assembled via Archangel Tyrael for that singular purpose, and amongst its plentiful members were Jered Cain, Deckard Cain, Zoltun Kulle, and Tal Rasha, with Deckard Cain eventually being one of the last of the Horadrim mages. Each Horadrim was given three Soulstones, meant to contain the demons after they had been felled. Eventually the three demons were captured and imprisoned, and the Horadrim began to fade into obscurity, having no missions left to complete.

Diablo

Many years later, a lord named Leoric traveled to the land of Tristram and declared himself the new king. His first kingly edict was that an old Horadric monastery be converted into a Zakarum cathedral. Archbishop Lazarus, his faithful advisor, covertly released the previously trapped Diablo from his Soulstone prison. Diablo's attempts to possess King Leoric grew increasingly more sinister, and eventually King Leoric descended into madness, killing all who dared to question his rule under the pretense of being traitors. War was declared on the unassuming kingdom of Westmarch. Diablo upped the ante and kidnapped King Leoric's son Prince Albrecht.

After his return from the catastrophic war with Westmarch, Lachdanan, captain of Leoric's army, was forced to murder Leoric. As Leoric clung to his last few seconds of life, he cursed Lachdanan and all who followed him. There wasn't much time to mourn, however, as during Leoric's burial he was resurrected as the Skeleton King.

Meanwhile, Archbishop Lazarus, left to his own devices, led droves of villagers into the cathedral, leaving them for dead as a disgusting, bloodthirsty demon butcher took them for his own. That's where you, the Hero, came in. The Hero fells the disgusting demon butcher and as the events of Diablo unfold, Archbishop Lazarus and the Skeleton King (previously Leoric) are defeated.

The Hero was tasked with defeating Diablo, which he or she is succeeds in doing, but then things take a turn for the worse. The noble soul attempted to contain Diablo within their own being, but Diablo's overflowing corruption was too much for such a valiant spirit. Demons overtook the Hero, and they became the Dark Wanderer, leaving Tristram to be overrun and destroyed by demons. Not every story has a happy ending.

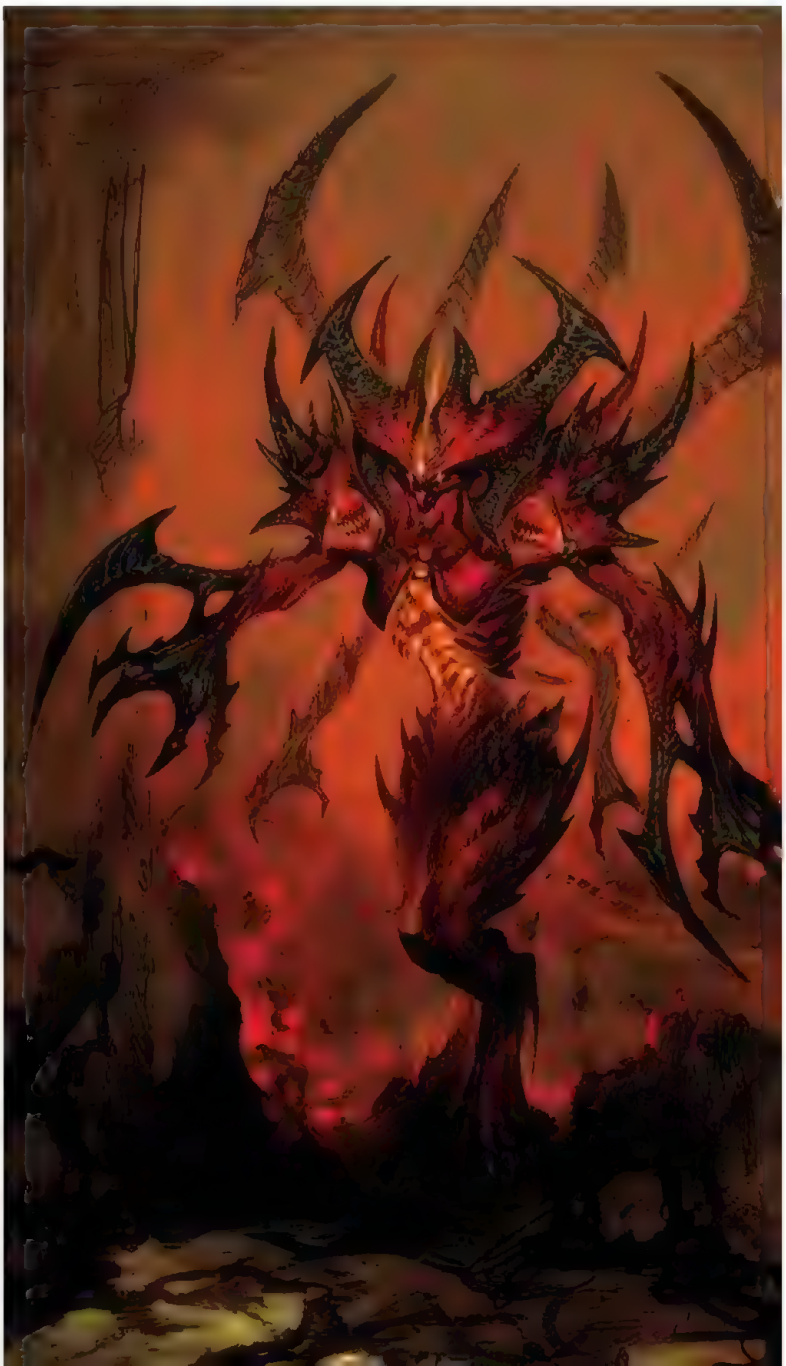
Diablo II

With Diablo still at large, a small group of heroes band together to defeat the foul beast once and for all. After successfully defeating Andariel, the group of travelers journeyed to the east in pursuit of the Dark Wanderer, or the Hero from the original *Diablo* game. Along the way, the heroes managed to defeat the demon lord Duriel within the Tomb of Tal Rasha, where it was also revealed that the demon Baal has been freed from his own Soulstone.

Eventually the Dark Wanderer is completely transformed into Diablo by way of Diablo's spirit nesting within. The band of heroes destroyed Diablo as well as his Soulstone, by way of a magical forge known as the Hellforge. Mephisto and his Soulstone followed suit.

Diablo II's expansion pack, *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction*, followed players as they fell Baal, the last remaining Prime Evil demon. Finally, peace reigned...for a relatively short amount of time.

This is where your *Diablo III* journey begins. C&G



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To Hell and Back

An interview with Alex Mayberry

Words by: Wayne Santos

One of the giants of the PC gaming landscape has finally risen, and it's set to easily take the crown of best-selling PC game for 2012. *Diablo III* is back, and it sold over three million copies in its first 24 hours, and broke six million in just a week. It's been getting a lot of serious playtime here at *CGM*, with our own editor-in-chief going above and beyond—way, way beyond—the call of duty in the "thoroughness" of his playthrough for review purposes. So it should come as no surprise that when we had the opportunity to ask some questions of the people who made the game, we'd jump at it. Fortunately, Blizzard obliged us, with no less than Alex Mayberry, Senior Producer on *Diablo III* taking some time out to answer our questions. Here's what he had to say.

C & G Magazine: *Diablo II* came out 12 years ago. In the meantime, you've been pretty with other big projects like *World of Warcraft* and *Starcraft II*. What year was it that the powers that be decided it was officially time to form a team and concentrate resources on *Diablo III*?

Alex Mayberry: It's hard to quantify *Diablo III*'s development in this way. We always had a strong desire to get back to the Diablo universe, but as stated in the question, we were pretty busy with a lot of other projects. We closed Blizzard North and brought many of the developers down to Irvine where they helped complete other games we were working on at the time. Things didn't really get rolling until Jay Wilson came on board as Game Director. But even then, there were often times in the early days where it was only Jay and a handful of people working on the project. We finally announced that we were developing *Diablo III* in 2008 at the World Wide Invitational in Paris. By that time we were certainly in full production. So it was sometime between Jay Wilson's arrival at Blizzard and that announcement that we finally ramped up full time on the game.

CGM: What was the reason for deciding that it was time to start work on Diablo III?

AM: *Diablo* is a franchise that we all love at Blizzard. We always wanted to get back to it. It was less about figuring out the reason for doing it, and more about getting the right people together that would bring the next version of the game to the 21st century.

CGM: *Diablo III* has a lot of newer names attached to it, such as Jay Wilson, formerly of Relic. How did you form the team when old Blizzard North members such as Bill Roper and Max and Eric Shaefer were no longer around as "resources" to consult on?

AM: It's important to remember that there are still members on the team who came from the Blizzard North studio, and these individuals have contributed heavily to the latest version of the *Diablo* legacy. But we have a lot of new faces as well, some from outside the company, some who came from other game projects within Blizzard. And all of these people have worked together to find just the right balance between bringing the world a new *Diablo* experience and holding true to what made the original games great. The unifying factor is that everyone on the team is a huge fan of *Diablo*, and we all wanted to make the greatest game that we could.

CGM: What do you think of the fragmentation of the gaming audience? It used to just be gamers, now it's casual, hardcore, mainstream, mobile and many others.

AM: When it comes to our audience we try to consider all gamers, whether they are "hard core" or "casual." What we recognize is that everyone plays games differently, and for different reasons. Our job as game developers then is to provide a gaming experience that appeals to as many people as possible. Our approach is to offer gameplay that is easy to learn, but difficult to master. But the key is that you don't *have* to master the game in order to enjoy it.

CGM: What do you think of the changes in the industry such as the move to more digital content?

AM: Technology is evolving and we recognize this at Blizzard. For example, we offer *Diablo III* as a digital download directly on our website. You can go online and purchase the game from our store right now. But we also recognize that many players still want a boxed product, so we provide that too. As technology continues to advance, we will keep pace with it and adopt it wherever it makes sense to do so. Ultimately though, our goal is to reach as large an audience as possible, and it's that motivation that drives our decisions.

CGM: What developments in the industry would Blizzard itself like to see implemented? A resurgence to PC gaming? More balanced spectrum of genres less heavily weighted in favor of the FPS? The complete elimination of physical media?

AM: Honestly, what we want to see from the industry is more great games to play! We are first and foremost gamers here, and what we want to see are new experiences that are fun to play. Gameplay is king, and that's what matters most to us.

CGM: What do you think of the changes to the "hierarchy" as small budget indie ventures, and super-budget projects like *Diablo III* make it difficult to compete in the "middle" or B-List tier?

AM: I think there are simply far more gamers today, and a far greater diversity of platforms to play games on. At the same time, modern technology gives us the power to do things we never could have done during those early days. Because of this, there is much greater competition to hold the attention of the audience, while at the same time costs have risen steeply to develop "AAA" games. So it's not surprising that these conditions may have combined to polarize the industry and weed out those developers who cannot consistently provide an engaging experience to players.

CGM: How did the discussions go in-house over whether to proceed with this, and what was ultimately the reason that made Blizzard commit to going ahead with this?

AM: From our experiences with previous *Diablo* games, as well as with *World of Warcraft*, we know that players want a marketplace where they can exchange items that they find in the game with other players. We realized that if we didn't develop the auction house for *Diablo III*, then third parties would end up doing it on their own. And since the third party experience subjects players to scams

and theft, and interferes with the overall integrity of the game, we decided that it made more sense for us to provide this marketplace ourselves.

CGM: Anything you can share about progress on console versions of *Diablo III*?

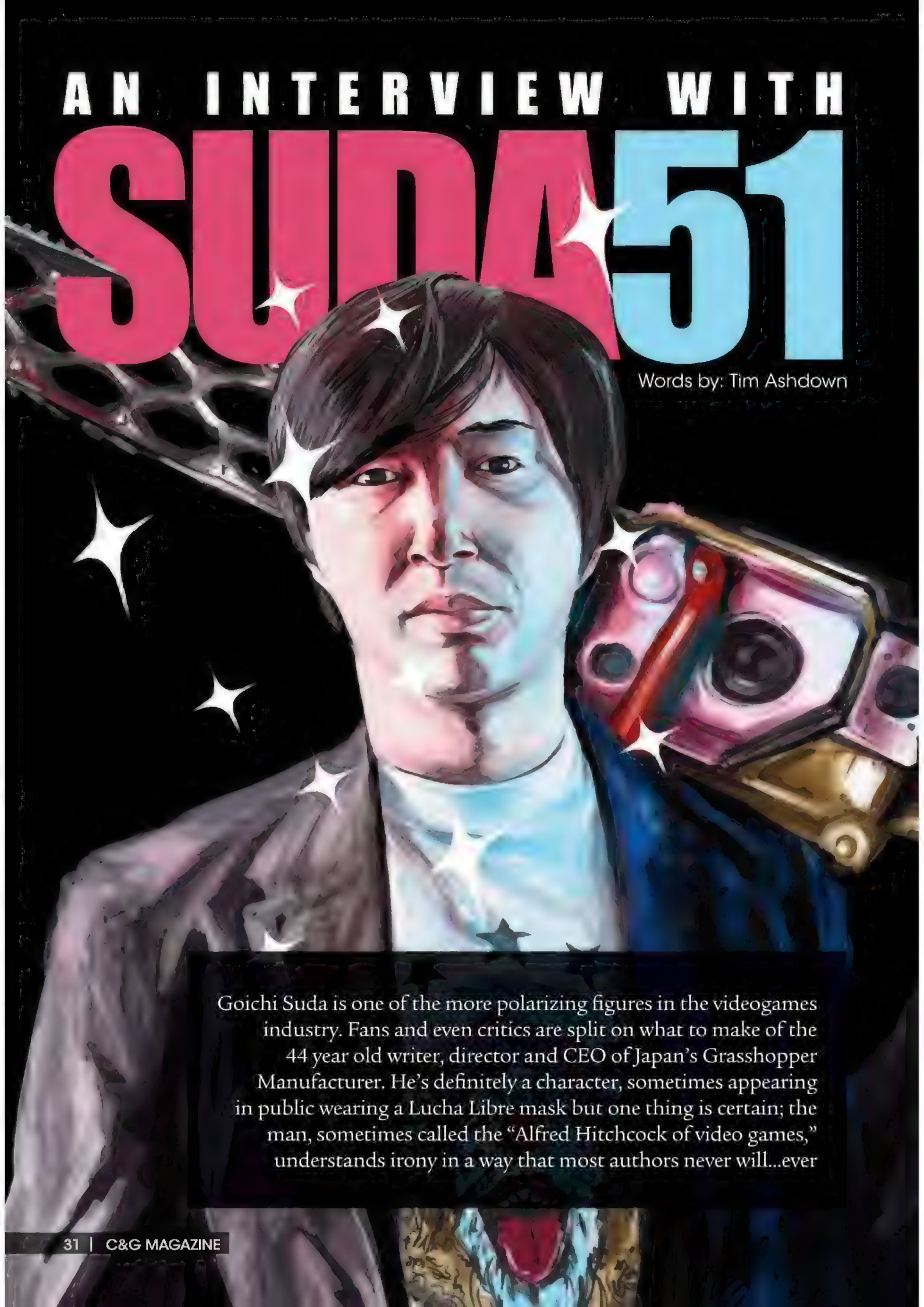
AM: It's no secret that we've been hiring developers to explore a console version of *Diablo III*. However, we are still very much in research and development mode, and we're not prepared to make any official announcement in regards to a console version. Our current focus is on proving to ourselves that we can take what we did on the PC and adapt it to a console-specific experience that meets our quality bar. What we will not do is take the PC game and make a simple console port. With that said, we are very optimistic and pleased with the results so far.

CGM: Is a pure console title something that Blizzard would ever consider, or was *Starcraft: Ghost* a lesson Blizzard doesn't want to repeat?

AM: Blizzard was ready to make a console game with *StarCraft: Ghost*, but unfortunately, that particular console generation wasn't really ready for a Blizzard game. But consoles have evolved and the technology of today is much more suited to our ambitions. We'll just have to see what happens with our explorations of a console version of *Diablo III*. Time will tell. C&G

AN INTERVIEW WITH SUDA51

Words by: Tim Ashdown



Goichi Suda is one of the more polarizing figures in the videogames industry. Fans and even critics are split on what to make of the 44 year old writer, director and CEO of Japan's Grasshopper Manufacturer. He's definitely a character, sometimes appearing in public wearing a Lucha Libre mask but one thing is certain; the man, sometimes called the "Alfred Hitchcock of video games," understands irony in a way that most authors never will...ever

Suda-san has been writing and directing games since 1993 but it wasn't until *Killer7* was released in 2005 for the GameCube and PlayStation 2 that his work came to the attention of North American audiences. *Killer7* polarized critics, some found it to be a truly visionary example of how artistic games can be, with its unique style, neo-noir inspired plot and radically different control scheme. While others found the plot to be needlessly complicated and found the "on-rails" controls limiting, but for better or worse *Killer7* put Suda51 and Grasshopper Manufacturer on the radar. In 2007 Suda51 again drew controversy from fans and reviewers with *No More Heroes*. The game was mostly a success both critically and commercially yet some fans were vocal in their distaste for the game. While the game contains a significant amount of humour and style, some critics found it repetitive and said it contained very little substance underneath the flash of the zany open-world adventure to become the top assassin. Personally, I found the game funny but can understand how its inherit repetition would turn some gamers off. Regardless, *No More Heroes* is Grasshopper Manufacturer's best selling title and so far their only game released outside of Japan to be given a sequel. Which brings us 2012, Suda51 is set to make us drool and decapitate with his newest endeavour, *Lollipop Chainsaw*. In *Lollipop Chainsaw* gamers will take control of sexy cheerleader/zombie hunter Juliet Starling, but whether gamers will cheer or retch remains to be seen. Some call him sexist, some call him brilliant, and some just call him Suda. Call him whatever you want but you must admit that there is a fine line between genius and insanity and Suda51 does back flips on it. He's not afraid to make fun of his audience, break the fourth wall or even make jokes that only he would find funny. I had the opportunity to speak to Suda-san at PAX East and it was one of the most nerve racking moments of my career as a journalist. I wasn't nervous because he's such a celebrated figure or because it was my first interview with a Japanese developer, it was because I was afraid that he might blow my mind.

C&G Magazine: Would you say that *Lollipop Chainsaw* is similar to your previous work or something completely different?

Goichi Suda: *Lollipop Chainsaw* is a very colourful game and I think that's the difference. This is a new type of zombie videogame. It used to be that zombie games were more scary, but this is more colourful with lots of hearts, rainbows, glitters, and shines and it makes people happy.

CGM: Do you think both women and men will find something they can enjoy in *Lollipop Chainsaw*?

GS: Girls are normally too scared to play zombie games but this is one that girls can play. I think girls will find that Juliet is similar to them and that she is something that girls want to be.

CGM: Was it your goal to create a relateable character that women as well a men can enjoy playing as?

GS: Yes. One of our goals was to create a zombie game that many people can enjoy and can relate to.

CGM: What was your main inspiration for *Lollipop Chainsaw*, and where did you draw your ideas from while working on this game?

GS: *Lollipop Chainsaw* was a combination of two ideas I've had for a long time. One was the idea of a horror/comedy game that takes place at a school. Also the image of Juliet as a cheerleader beating up enemies with a chainsaw. I think that's a pretty good combination.

CGM: Where does a Cheerleader even get a chainsaw let alone learn how to use it with such lethality and skill?

GS: [Laughs] Well, Juliet comes from a family of zombie hunters so she's been trained since she was a child and she can use a chainsaw just like she can play with a puppy. She used to sleep with the chainsaw instead of a stuffed bear.

CGM: How would you feel about your work being compared to that of Joss Whedon who created *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?

GS: It's hard to compare Juliet to Buffy. *Buffy* is a great Drama but Buffy is cute. I had Buffy in the back of my mind when I created Juliet but I think that we have established a new heroine in this game. Buffy has been a pop idol on TV and I think that Juliet can become a pop idol in the videogame industry.

CGM: How do you feel about the way your games are received here in the west, North America and Europe? Are you surprised that people enjoy the work of Grasshopper Manufacturer so much or is it something you expected?

GS: I think that with this game, [*Lollipop Chainsaw*] people have been paying much closer attention than we have expected and that makes me excited and very happy.

CGM: What is that you hope gamers or anyone who is a fan of Grasshopper Manufacturer get out of this game or take away from it?

GS: I believe that the fans will love Juliet and to share in her experience, her journey, her adventure, and her love story with Nick. Nick and Juliet have a very tight connection they are the best boyfriend and girlfriend. C&G

BATMAN
WORDS BY ADAM CARTER

Psychiatrist says he's depressed, narcissistic, and hopelessly screwed up.

Anyone who dresses up like a bat and fights crime could be classified a neurotic mess.

Batman is a lot of things – but a shining beacon of mental stability, he isn't.

"His interpersonal relationships are hopelessly screwed up," says Donald Young, an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of Toronto. "That's the bottom line, and that's what can happen from an early parental loss."

Young, who holds a PhD in clinical psychology from the University of Toronto, agreed to psychoanalyze Batman – no hourly fee or time on the couch required.

Clearly all of his findings are hypothetical. But they give lots of insight as to just how messed up the dark knight really is.

His parents

Young says it's very likely Bruce Wayne could be enduring a lifetime of intense depression, stemming from the murder of his parents. They were gunned down in the street at an early age, and Wayne was forced to watch, helpless. That's usually seen as the catalyst for his transformation into Batman. But it goes much deeper than that.

"A loss like this could really stain someone's personality with really strong depressive feelings," Young says. "They won't expect anything good to ever happen to them."

"And maybe deep down, they don't want anything good to happen to them, because they could feel guilty about the pleasure."

For that reason, Batman would never feel a sense of fulfillment, no matter what he did. It doesn't matter how many people in Gotham he saves from muggers or rapists, or even how many times he defeats Darkseid. In the end, he stays locked in a cycle of depressive feelings, unable to feel happy about anything. The situation also smacks of classic case of survivor's guilt, as Bruce Wayne would likely always wish he'd gone down in his parent's place.

"He could feel so guilty that he would never be allowed to have pleasure, even when he triumphs over evil," Young says. "He can't be happy, he won't let himself be happy – his conscience will always punish him."

But strangely enough, his burning need to fight crime and help the innocent is actually one of the least likely scenarios to spin out of that kind of trauma. Young said Bruce Wayne becomes "super moral," which is a much less common reaction than being deranged or angry.

"It's not an uncommon reaction that when kids are subjected to that kind of violence, they grow up being violent ... like a psychopath or sociopath," he says. "Often times the person ends up terribly angry and will take advantage of others, rather than fighting crime."

Which brings us to another familiar face.

The Joker

Batman and the Joker have often been portrayed as two sides of the same coin – incredibly similar, created by tragedy, but their slight differences making them polar opposites. In a lot of situations, they're the only people who can truly understand each other – how they think, how they work. Both are wrought with compulsions. Batman compulsively must be good, while the Joker must compulsively be evil. But on top of the compulsions, Young says the Joker also represents Batman's narcissism, in that he's actually a vessel for all the things Batman hates about himself.

"The Joker is like the cleaved-off portion of Batman that he disavows," he says. "He identifies with it, because it's part of him." This idea is called "projective identification," Young says. "You project the stuff you don't like about yourself onto somebody else, and then form a relationship with them."

So, instead of going around beating up yourself, you project what you see as the "bad part" of yourself onto somebody else and beat up on them. Not exactly healthy, but it does make sense. The Joker represents everything that Batman isn't.

"But the important part is that you want them around to beat up on," Young says. "So they become a very important relationship."

In essence, Batman needs the Joker. He's a vessel for all the things he can't stand about himself, a kind of warped mirror image.

"You see that a lot with unstable people," Young says. "They'll take aspects of themselves they don't like and attribute them to you. Then they form a relationship with that bad stuff – perhaps punishing you because you have their bad traits."

This also cements Batman as a narcissist, because in a way, he's forming a relationship with himself. But this isn't the only situation like that in Bruce Wayne's life.

Robin

When it comes to Robin, Young can't help but stifle a few laughs. "The sidekick situation is curious in and of itself ... for obvious reasons. Batman's a guy that climbs up poles and lives with Robin. That would make any Freudian drool," he says.

Jokes aside, Batman's relationship with Robin is also kind of narcissistic. Robin is one of the few people who gets to see Wayne beyond the mask and knows him in any real capacity. Dick Grayson's backstory is incredibly similar to Batman's. He's left an orphan when his parents are murdered right in front of him. So Wayne takes him in. That might be out of kindness, but it's also because he can see much of himself in the boy which is a little more twisted than it seems on the surface.

"It's a strong identification with himself, the only person he can relate to," Young says. "That makes him incredibly self centred – he can only extend his affection to a younger version of himself."

A person growing and expanding his relationships beyond his parents is an important part of development. But in Wayne's case, they were stolen from him far too early. So his progression has been halted, and he can only relate to people that remind him of himself. "Now he's going to spend his whole life stuck in that stage, not taking the next step and being able to relate to women and people that are different from him," Young says.

Taking Robin under his wing might also have something to do with his parent's death. "To identify with his lost parents, he becomes a pillar of the community," Young says. "His identification is so strong that he needs a child to relate to, because he is the parent. So he picks this young lad, which is again, him."

Subsequent Robins don't have the exact same backstory as Dick Grayson, but they still come with their own issues. Jason Todd ended up pretty sociopathic himself, and Bruce's son Damien is hardly a well-adjusted child. If anything, Tim Drake was the most normal of the kids who suited up next to Batman.

Treatment

So what could help Bruce Wayne get past the deaths that haunt him? "Well, a very pedestrian answer would be medication," Young laughs. Anti-depressants could alter the chemical processes that make him act the way he does. "As for traditional therapy, it would be a long-term psychoanalytic treatment, where hopefully the person can get it straight."

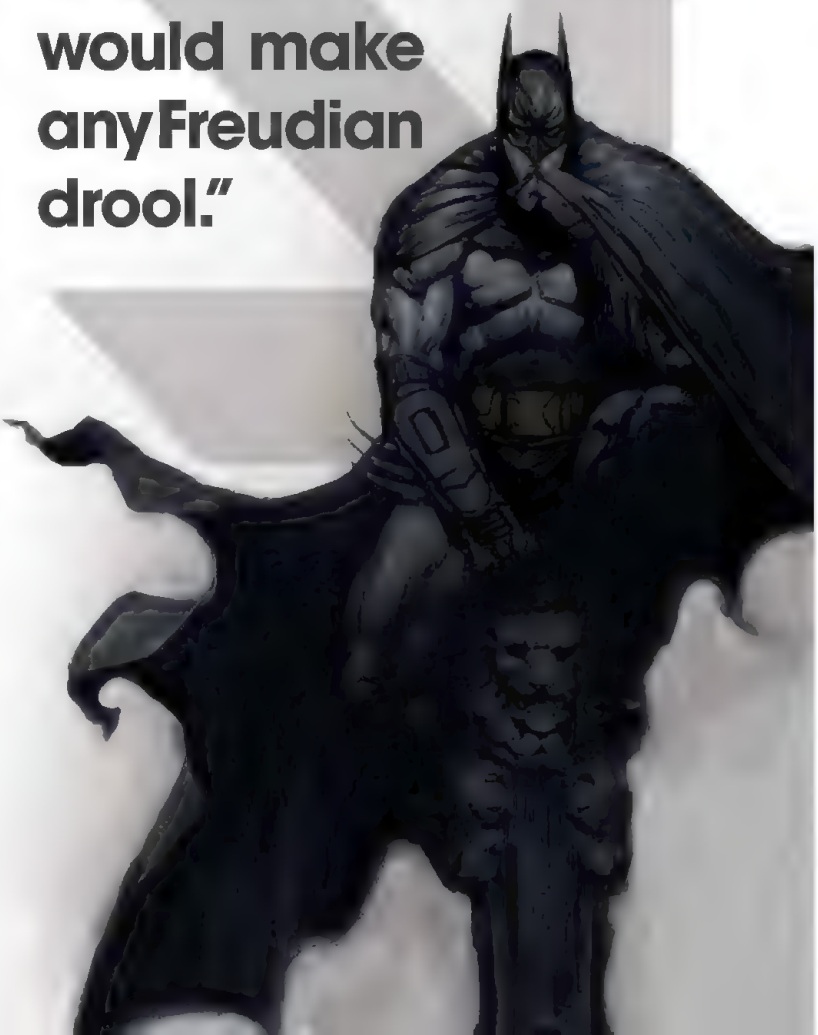
But in Batman's case, Young says therapy itself would likely not be enough. It would take an awful lot of talking it out to pull Bruce Wayne out the spiral of self-loathing and depression he feels. "It's likely that he might feel better for a little while," Young says. "But without some intense medication to go with the therapy, he'd likely sink back into his old habits."

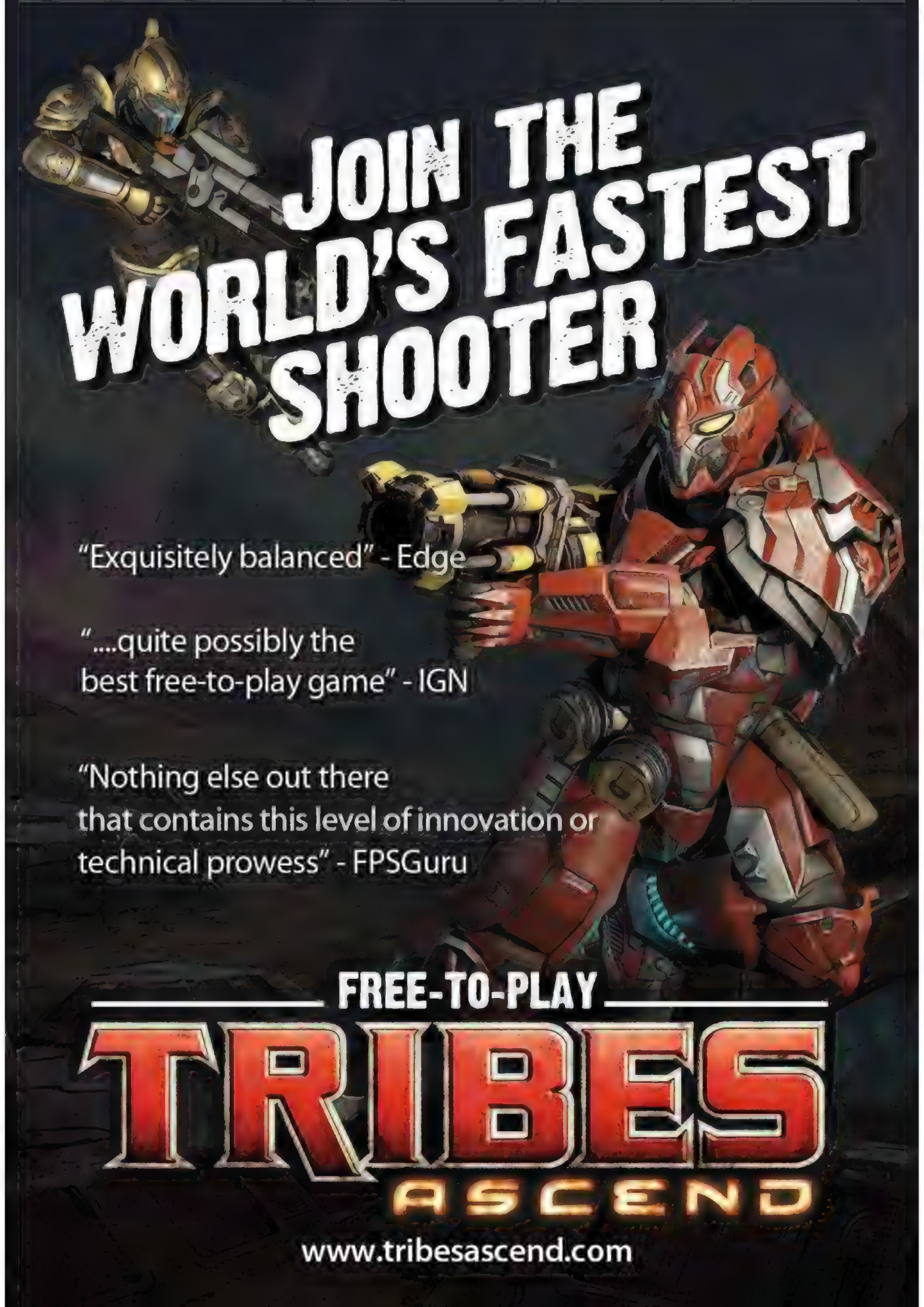
Knowing Bruce Wayne, neither the therapy nor medication would be an option. It's also likely that he'd try to outwit any therapist that tried to help him. In fact, Young says he'd also probably project negative things about himself onto the therapist, much like he does with the Joker.

So for better or for worse, Batman is here to stay.

This bodes well for Gotham. But Bruce Wayne is still hurting – and likely will be for good. C&G

"Batman's a guy that climbs up poles and lives with Robin. That would make any Freudian drool."

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LOSING A LEGEND

Joe Simon Remembered by the Man Who Knew Him Best

Words by: Aaron Broverman

Young comic book fans are missing a golden opportunity. It's truly incredible to think that it took only a handful of second-generation New York Jews to create all the world's most legendary superheroes. We all know their characters, but how many of us really know them?

Nothing puts that in sharper relief than the passing of Jerry Robinson and Joe Simon on consecutive Wednesdays last December. Robinson was our last founding link to the Batman mythos, having created Alfred Pennyworth, Robin, Two-Face and the greatest comic book villain of all time – The Joker. Simon was one half of one of the most prolific partnerships in the industry with Jack Kirby. As the Lennon & McCartney of comics, Simon & Kirby gave us *Captain America*, *The Challengers of the Unknown*, *Manhunter*, *The Boy Commandos*, *The Newsboy Legion* and countless other characters.

As the founding editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics, (Then known as Timely) Simon discovered Kirby, Steve Ditko, Stan Lee and many others who would go on to shape the Marvel Universe as we know it.

For every legend lost, our opportunity to connect with and learn from those who built the Golden Age of Comics firsthand is getting more and more tenuous with each passing year.

This stark reality first hit me in 2004: Will Eisner was the guest of honour at the Toronto Comic Con and I really wanted to meet him. Problem was, the event was in June and, being in university, I had nowhere to live, which sent me back home to the opposite coast over the summer. I thought I'd meet him next time, but Will Eisner died the very next year.

From then on, I pledged I would never miss an opportunity to meet or interview a founder of The Golden Age. I would take every chance because I knew I may never get another one. It was with this mentality that I pursued an interview with Joe Simon for this very magazine. It was July 2011 and timing couldn't have been more perfect. *Captain America: The First Avenger* had just hit theatres and Joe had just released his second autobiography, *Joe Simon: My Life in Comics*.

"It was just so thrilling to print out the manuscript in its earlier form and sit there while he's going through it page by page making notes and just watching this man -- at age 97 -- with just as sharp an editorial mind as I could've imagined," remembers the book's editor and close friend Steve Saffel.

The book follows *The Comic Book Makers*, a biography of Joe and other legends that Joe wrote with his son Jim in 1990. It combines new insight to some of the same anecdotes covered in that older work with new ones never before revealed.

For instance, did you know the inspiration for The Red Skull came from a deformed red cherry on top of a hot fudge sundae during Simon's lunch break at Childs Restaurant in Times Square? No? How about the fact that the name for Captain America's sidekick Bucky Barnes comes from Simon's friend on his high school basketball team Bucky Pierson? Didn't think so. What about the fact that Joe Simon's real name isn't even Joe Simon? It's Hymie Simon. I know, right? But perhaps the biggest secret, that calls into question a lot of what I thought I knew about comic book history, is that the idea for *Spider-Man* probably didn't spring organically from Stan Lee's brain pan.

As Simon tells it, it came from an unpublished Simon and Kirby concept for Crestwood Publications called *The Silver Spider* – initially known as *Spider-Man* before Simon changed it at the last minute. When Atlas Comics was just about to shut down due to flagging sales, Jack Kirby was able to convince Lee to get publisher Martin Goodman to hold off, while Kirby brought in new ideas for characters. One of those ideas was *The Silver Spider*. Soon after, Atlas reopened as Marvel Comics and after *The Fantastic Four*, *Spider-Man* followed.

"On one hand, I think [Joe] found it interesting that he had these pages done by Jack Oleck and C.C. Beck for the *Silver Spider* and it appeared as if Jack [Kirby] had shown those to Stan. After that, I don't think Joe claimed to really know because he wouldn't be able to," says Saffel. "At the same time, I think he saw a cause and effect there that was interesting. That's sort of the extent of it, it's entirely possible that he had had a hand in the spark of creation that had led to *Spider-Man*, without necessarily creating *Spider-Man*."

Saffel then took it a step further, claiming on Simon's behalf, in a *Comics and Gaming* exclusive, that Simon may have had another indirect hand in creating Marvel's first family, something Simon never laid claim to during his lifetime.

"Over the years, the other concept that has been most compared to *The Challengers of the Unknown*, because of the Kirby involvement, has been *The Fantastic Four*. If indeed, Jack's approach to *The Fantastic Four* was at all informed by *The Challengers of the Unknown*, that would mean that Joe Simon had some spark of inspiration for both *Spider-Man* and *The Fantastic Four*."

But, even if he never had anything to do with the creation of *Spider-Man* or *The Fantastic Four*, the Marvel Universe still wouldn't exist without Joe Simon because he never would've hired a 16-year-old Stan Lee as his assistant, gopher and eventual protégé. I'd asked, in the questions I'd sent him, whether he still kept in touch with Stan and whether they still fell into that master-student relationship when they saw each other, but after months of back-and-forth with his publisher Titan Books, Joe passed away before I got the chance and Saffel was left to answer my questions.

"Joe would see Stan very rarely because Stan was on the west coast and Joe was on the east coast. I think the last time they saw each other was 2008's New York Comic Con where there was a legends panel and they were on this panel together. When they saw each other, they were just so happy and Joe would frequently comment to me that he thought Stan had really done good, that he was a smart man and that he had really made something of himself. "

Simon's pride could only be matched by Lee's utter reverence for him and Lee told Simon so when they met at the panel after not seeing each other for 40 years: "I also saw the first copy of *Captain America* and I don't know if Joe Simon has got enough credit for that because when I came to work with Jack and Joe, Joe was doing drawing also and I tell you, I couldn't tell the difference between Joe's drawings and Jack's drawings. Joe was a wonderful artist. For all I knew, Joe may have taught Jack a lot of stuff, so Joe hasn't gotten enough credit. He wasn't only the editor, head writer and my boss -- He taught me a hell of a lot: he taught me how to smoke cigars, he taught me how to scream at people – but, he was also a great artist and storyteller himself and I want to make sure people know that."

the Marvel Universe wouldn't exist without Joe Simon because he never would have hired a 16-year-old Stan Lee as his assistant, gopher and eventual protege.

In fact, Joe knew it was his experience at virtually every position in the comic industry that had so many future stars eager to work with him. "Joe always said that one reason so many people really liked working with him was that he knew what they did personally and intimately," says Saffel.

"He literally did everything. He packaged, he published, he edited, he wrote, he penciled, he inked, he coloured and he lettered. He could do all the disciplines to some degree, so he could inherently understand what the people were doing when they were working for him, that, I think, is one of the great, unique aspects of Joe Simon. He was probably one of two really huge renaissance men in the industry of comics. He and Will Eisner."

This is why his loss is so devastating for the comic community. Add to that, the loss of Jerry Robinson and we're losing a treasure trove of history, skill and experience that simply disappeared and is never coming back. It's even more unfair when you're a young comic fan, relatively new to the art, who only recently started learning the history behind some of their favourite heroes. With Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Bob Kane, Bill Finger, Jack Cole, Jack Kirby, Bill Everett and so many others already lost before I truly got into comics, I often wonder how much richer my experience of the medium would be if they were still around. As it stands now, I have so many questions and fewer people to fill in the gaps each year, but Saffel has reassuring advice for fans like me who feel like they're always playing catch-up.

"The answer to that is enjoy what you have now, seize the moment when you have the opportunity, tell the people whose work you appreciate that you do and enjoy. It's that simple: don't postpone joy, grab it and appreciate it for what it is, that's something we can do with everybody in our lives."

Saffel certainly didn't postpone joy when he and his wife joined Simon and the legend's friend's and family for a screening of *Captain America: First Avenger* at Simon's home in New York. It was one of Saffel's greatest memories with his friend.

According to Saffel, Simon had always wondered how they were going to handle the costume back when he was only getting concept drawings. But, once he saw the film, he couldn't have been happier, especially when it came to the Busby Berkeley USO number.

"That really struck a chord with him. He just loved it. There were these moments where he particularly noted the skill that went into it. The moment when Steve Roger's is being beaten up in the alleyway and he grabs the trash can lid, uses it like a shield and spins it around, Joe just looked at me and goes, 'Oh, that's good!' He was studying their storytelling technique and enjoying every bit of the ride."

He was offered a cameo, but the travel to London would've been too strenuous for the then 98-year-old. Instead, he appeared on the DVD and he and Jack were given full credit for the character at the top of the credits. Though it wasn't the first time.

"Each time Joe moved from one project to another or one company to another, he tended to look forward not back," says Saffel. "By the time he left Timely, he was already figuring out what he would be doing for DC and focusing on that. DC was actually the first place that gave Simon and Kirby cover credit. I think Joe was always pleased that people noted his skill, but he wasn't running around expecting them to regard him as a household name."

Simon will always be a name in the Saffel household. Their friendship extends 18 years, right after the passing of Jack Kirby, when Saffel worked for Marvel and hired Simon to do the inks on a wraparound John Byrne cover for a *Captain America* anniversary magazine.

"It's far more painful to lose him as a friend than to lose his him as a creator. What he created will live on. I do think it's kind of sad because I think a lot of today's readers don't see the material in the light that should be shone. His material was so seminal that without it, today's readers and today's creators couldn't be doing what they're doing. There are a few people who are particularly irreplaceable, in that they created the first comic book, but guys like Joe and Jack came so soon after that and had such an impact, and the same with Jerry, that without them we just wouldn't have what we have today."

Steve Saffel continues to preserve Joe Simon's legacy with the help of Titan Books. In the fall of 2012, they will release *The Simon and Kirby Library: Science Fiction* followed by *The Simon and Kirby Library: Horror* in 2013. Both volumes feature classic tales and never before published concepts from one of the most enduring duos in comics. C&G

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Choker Vol. 1

The Activity Vol. 1

Batman: Knightfall

Before Watchmen: Minutemen 1

REVIEW GUIDE:

90 - 100
Games with little to no flaws that provide an exceptional entertainment experience. New high watermarks of quality or design are established with such titles, and these games are must-haves for fans of the genre as well as good places for newcomers to start.

80 - 89
Games that manage to provide a good, entertaining experience with only small flaws that are overlooked by the polish or innovation of the title. Both fans and newcomers to the genre will likely find something to appreciate here.

70 - 79
Games that manage to keep mechanical, technical and design flaws to a minimum while providing a solid experience. Generally enough to satisfy but not impress fans or gamers outside the genre.

60 - 69
Games that manage to get it mostly right functionally, without ever really moving beyond that. Flaws present can still have an impact on the experience. Fans of the genre and more tolerant gamers can enjoy these titles.

50-59
Games that meet the minimum requirements of functionality, but just barely. Mechanical, technical and design problems are still present, though not to the point of complete unplayability. Only desperate fans would see value in these titles.

Below 50
Games that fail to meet even the most basic requirements of entertainment and competence with serious mechanical and/or design flaws. Avoid at all costs.

Max Payne 3

REVIEW BY: Phil Brown

SYSTEM PC, PS3, Xbox 360 DEVELOPER Rockstar Games PUBLISHER Rockstar Games ESRB M 90/100

It's been years since we've seen the grizzled sharp-shooting detective Max Payne. In his long awaited return in, glorious HD much has changed, but much has stayed the same. The series was one of the first to incorporate cinematic storytelling into video games and that is a continued focus here, now taking influence from a wider array of movies to reflect a new era. In previous generations, the game came out with obvious John Woo and *The Matrix*-influenced slow motion bullet slinging ballet, with film noir underpinnings and graphic novel cut scenes. Bullet time remains the bedrock of the gameplay, but the visual style and world is a little different. Delving deeper into alcoholism, pain, and failure, our buddy Max is no longer a cop, but a gun for hire. He's off the rain-drenched seedy streets of New York and killing legions of bad guys in the sun-burned, poverty-scarred, and war-torn world of South America.

Full cut scenes connect the levels rather than animated comic book panels, with a jittery, blown out visual style filled with split screens and abrupt edits to mimic both the visual aesthetic of directors like Tony Scott and the *Crank* team of Neveldine/Taylor and Payne's deteriorating booze n' pain killer fueled mental state. At first this visual approach seems excessive, but gradually things calm down and it settles into an eyeball pleasing groove. Despite the change in locale and colour palate, the threequel is still rooted in the endless gunfights and hard boiled crime fiction of its predecessors. Longtime fans should be pleased, but newcomers can still appreciate it as the next hard R genre movie flavoured outing from Rockstar. It continues the company's ever-evolving skill with mind-boggling graphics, long-form storytelling, and lovingly graphic violence. Simply put, it's 12+ hours of the finest violent videogaming on the market. That should get mouths watering over how Rockstar has plans to top themselves with *GTA V*.

We meet up with our buddy Max at the bottom of his latest bottle, working as a bodyguard in Sao Paulo, Brazil. His job is to protect the absurdly rich Rodrigo Branco and his spoiled siblings as they have coke parties on skyscrapers and yachts while counting their riches. Payne was never a happy camper, but feels particularly burned out by this gig, self-medicating with gallons of scotch and handfuls of pills. Of course, a quick kidnapping has him back in action and soon the guy is traveling the country in search of his missing clients. Payne dangles out of helicopters, stumbles through urban war zones, blows up decrepit buildings, kicks off a prison riot, and murders hundreds of people on his quest for redemption. You know, just like the old days only bigger and dirtier. There was clearly an attempt to reinvent the character/franchise in this new outing, if only to create a little distance from the vomit

Simply put, it (*Max Payne 3*) is 12+ hours of the finest videogaming on the market.

inducing Mark Wahlberg movie. As a fan, that seemed worrying at first, but those concerns quickly vanished. Max Payne is still the same guy in a new world. His personality is just a little deeper and harsher while the game's sense of humour has become more dark n' twisted rather than campy. There are flashbacks to the old trench-coat New York days, yet the new world with a bearded Max sporting a shaved head proves to be far more compelling.

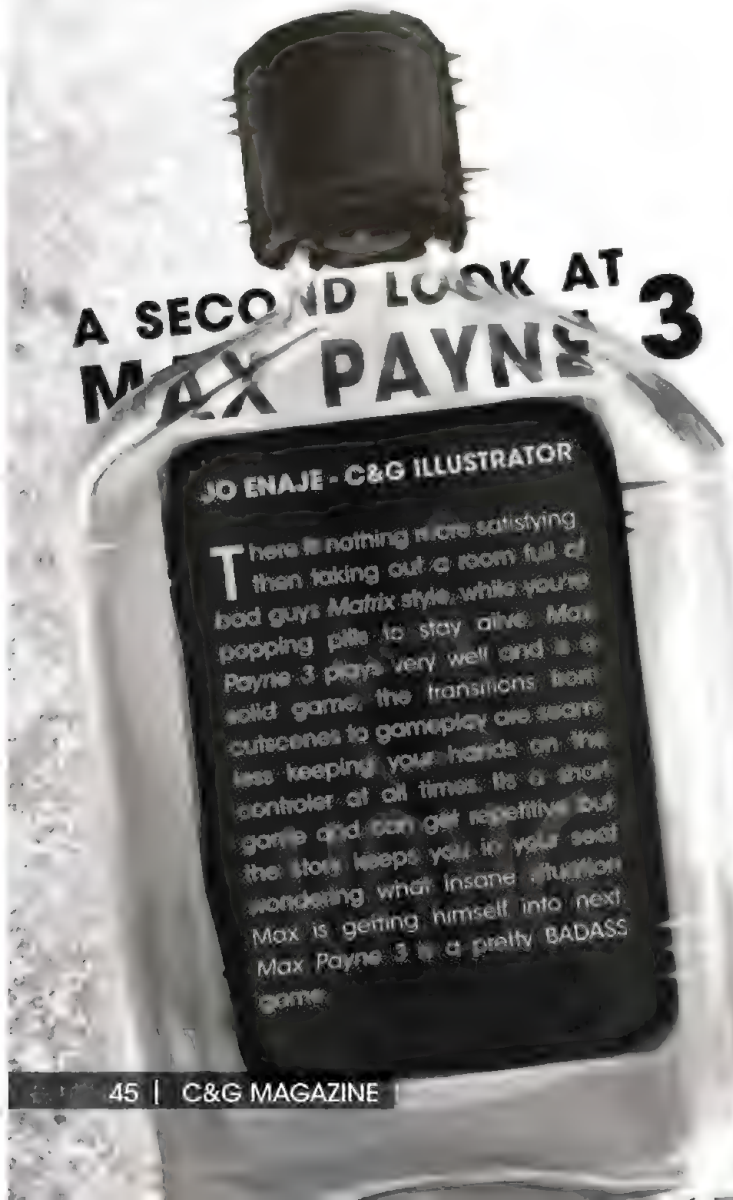
It was definitely a risk to change the style of the series this much and it pays off. The cut scenes are beautifully rendered with facial animation that must have borrowed a little tech from *L.A. Noire* and flow into gameplay beautifully with no load times. The tale is so ambitious and features such massive set pieces that at times the game feels like Rockstar's R-rated answer to the PG-13 action movie shenanigans of the *Uncharted* series. Story, action, and gameplay mix for a potent and delicious cocktail filled some spectacular hard edged dialogue (a few of my favourite lines include: "It was only the afternoon and I'd already been kicked out of a bar and visited a cat house. This latest midlife crisis was right on track," and "I killed more cops than cholesterol.").

With no open world element, this is Rockstar's most streamlined plot this console generation, and represents one hell of a writing job that loses points only for cramming more of the action packed highlights into the first half than the second. It's one of those rare games where you'll actually be playing to see what happens next in the story and not just to see how many drones you'll get to machine gun in the next room. The only thing that puts the experience slightly lower than *Uncharted* on the cinematic gaming spectrum is that Payne's controls are limited entirely to running, ducking, and shooting, meaning that some of the more ambitious action sequences have to be played entirely in a cut scene rather than constantly cutting between animation and gameplay. It's a slight letdown given some of the things that Payne does over the course of the story. But at least that leaves room for improvement for *Max Payne 4*, a game that hopefully won't require another nine year wait.

The gameplay itself is true to the tracks laid by the previous *Max Payne* outings. Basically, you're required to shoot bad guys, but you have the heightened ability to go into slow motion "bullet time" and fire your gun at several foes while diving through the air to ensure they are all good and dead by the time you hit the ground. You can choose various levels of aiming assistance from a tap button auto-aim to fully manual aiming for show-offs. No matter what mode you choose, bullet time works so well that diving down a flight of stairs while shooting some hood in the face with an Uzi is just as fun on your 12th hour of shooting as it is the first time around. Improved in-game physics mean that now if you time your jump improperly and dive into a wall, bullet time stops and the falls looks realistic and painful. This makes things either challenging or hilarious depending on how many guns are firing on you while it's happening. There are a couple of new bullet time additions as well such as levels that kick off while flying through the air in slow mo-

tion while trying to kill everyone in the room or a great new feature that automatically enters bullet time if you are about to be killed and gives you one last opportunity to shoot your enemy before he knocks you off. Get a good kill in that mode and you'll get to see your enemy explode with bullets from multiple angles that you can slow down with the push of a button to create your own climax. The cover-shooting dynamic of *GTA IV* and *Red Dead Redemption* is also an option and a life saver in busy rooms. You can still use bullet time to aim from the crouch and it helps, but let's face it if you're not diving through the air while you're firing two handguns in slow motion, what's the point of bullet time?

The single player story mode in *Max Payne 3* is the main draw and it's a doozy. A deep n' dozen hour headfirst dive into corruption involving involuntary organ donors, the sex trade industry, drug wars, corrupt prison breaks and just about every other situation that you'd want to take Max Payne into with a gun. Given the care and craft that went into the visuals that will make your eyes explode and a story that will require you to find a new edge to your seat, it is by far the most satisfying element on the disc. However, Rockstar has provided some extras to keep you comin' back for more. First up, there's Arcade Mode that allows you to replay chapters striving for time or points that are ranked online. It's a fun way to replay the game, but nothing particularly spectacular.


A SECOND LOOK AT
MAX PAYNE 3
JO ENAJE - C&G ILLUSTRATOR
There is nothing more satisfying
than taking out a room full of
bad guys Matrix style, while you're
popping pills to stay alive. Max
Payne 3 plays very well and is a
solid game, the transitions from
cutscenes to gameplay are seam-
less keeping your hands on the
controller at all times. Its a short
game and can get repetitive but
the story keeps you in your seat
wondering what insane situation
Max is getting himself into next.
Max Payne 3 is a pretty BADASS
game.

Next up, Rockstar has provided some online multiplayer. It's essentially a third person death-match situation and fairly fun for what it is. The only issue is that like *Red Dead Redemption,* you can use bullet time in multiplayer, but it's rarely useful. If you're facing off against someone in real time, aiming and shooting is far less time consuming that diving, aiming, and shooting and often you'll find your head blown off in the middle of some fancy move by an opponent who skipped the acrobatics and pulled the trigger. A couple of original multiplayer modes were also thrown in like "Payne Killer" where one member of the group plays as Max Payne against everyone one else and then whoever kills him takes over as Payne. The other new mode is the lengthy Gang Wars option, which weaves together story elements with a multi-level team battles involving tasks like territorial skirmishes, bomb planting, and palm-sweat inducing single life death matches. It's an interesting and original multiplayer option, but ultimately if you want story, you'll play single player. Multiplayer is all about glorious killings and the plot stuff just gets in the way of beating kids who think they're so hot. The multiplayer options are certainly nice, I just don't see the community lasting for very long and I'd imagine more than anything else these new modes are a trial run for what will inevitably be a huge multiplayer component in *GTA 5*.

Max Payne 3 is a gloriously gritty, hard-edged, shoot em' up. A worthy new chapter to the blood-soaked series as well as an impressive addition to the incomparable Rockstar catalogue. Sure, the designers should have saved some of their best ideas for the second half of the story and the multiplayer mode is more of a pleasant bonus than vital addition, but that doesn't really matter. The title combines simple, smooth, and endlessly enjoyable gameplay with a surprisingly complex story and a fascinatingly flawed anti-hero (the voiceover performance by series regular James McCaffrey is a work of growling, cigarette scarred beauty). This time out, Rockstar sacrificed their staple open-world freedom for controlled storytelling and created a tale that might not require much brain power, but offers further proof that videogames can be a writer's medium. This is about as good as action gaming gets and in terms of visceral entertainment, offering impressive console-based competition on the blockbusters currently raking in dump trucks of cash in the multiplexes. If you feel like killing bad guys this summer, there's really only one option. As drunk, lonely, suicidal, and downright insane as he may be, Max Payne is the man for that job. Bring him back soon Rockstar. This guy has been missed and clearly needs to get out more. C&G

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DIABLO III

REVIEW BY: Brendan Frye

SYSTEM: PC, Mac **DEVELOPER:** Blizzard Entertainment **PUBLISHER:** Blizzard Entertainment **ESRB:** M **89 / 100**

Diablo III (*D3*) is here. After a 12 year slumber the spawn of hell are once again clawing their way up from the pit to rain destruction on humanity. A select group of warriors fight the menace and bring peace to the land once again. *Diablo* defined a genre, indoctrinating a generation in the hack, slash, loot mentality. Many games have taken up this style (*Torchlight*, *Titan's Quest*, etc) each one making slight modifications to the overall formula - yet at the core they all followed a simple idea. The player clicks on things and watches them die, and picks up items. This is true for *D3*; yet they have made many changes to the core systems of *Diablo* that make the game not only the best of the *Diablo* series - it is also the best of the *Diablo*-style games to date.

The story of *Diablo* has always been standard Gothic fiction. The forces of evil are on the rise and it is up to mankind to try and push them back. *Diablo III* is no different, yet with Blizzard's work on the *Warcraft* series and the deep fiction they created there, the hope was that *Diablo III* would surpass the previous titles in depth. Sadly this is not the case.

Although beautiful to look at, the cut scenes Blizzard have crafted are shallow. They tell the basic story but it all feels more like a means to get the player from location to location then a real narrative we should care about. There are far too many clichés to take the dialogue seriously and, due to the nature of the game, your character never seems to play a role in the cut scenes. It creates a strange disconnect where the player is the saviour of humanity yet never present during critical scenes.

Even though the overall story may be lacking the same cannot be said for the gameplay. Blizzard have refined what made *Diablo* so engaging and worked on ensuring it would be easy to pick up for new players but it retains the depth veteran players demand. Loot is still one of the key elements that fill the players need for instant gratification. The addition of automatic gold pickup take some of the tedium out of the classic formula allows the flow of action to continue with fewer interruptions. The constant lottery feeling at every drop is still present; every possible drop could be the rare item that boosts the character to a new tier of the elite, but could also be a collection of useless items that are only useful to sell. This can often be an exercise in frustration when the majority of drops are useless but the surprising moments when that 'yellow' (rare) item drops it makes up for all the frustration.

The weapons in *D3* do act a little differently than in previous titles in the series, because of the new way skills work in *D3*. The weapon the character holds may not necessarily translate to the attack they perform. For example, a Demon Hunter may be holding a crossbow yet be firing bombs. The damage bonuses the weapon endows to players is still active despite differing skills being used. It's convenient mechanically, but can occasionally break with the "realism" in the game, what little there is.

Blizzard wasn't content to just generate near endless supplies of loot, and have opted for the ability to craft new and powerful gear. The blacksmith you meet early on in the campaign can take magical items you find in the world or salvage components from gear to craft new items. These pieces of gear are given randomized magical properties, so sometimes the money will be spent and something that is basically useless to your character may come out. It's all part of the risk versus reward system Blizzard is known for, with the elusive promise of the next crafting session yielding, potentially, a powerful weapon of demon destruction.

Despite some issues, *Diablo III* is the new king of the action RPG genre.

There is one serious downside to this system and that comes in the form of expenses. If you want to make use of the blacksmith you will need to spend a great deal of gold training him. If this is not done early on, it can be rather pricy, but for stat min-maxers, it's vital. Without this training, none of the gear crafted is viable to end-game characters. Also, since all characters in a given mode share the same blacksmith—and jeweller—once this has been boosted it the upgraded will carry over to subsequent replays on higher difficulty settings, meaning it only needs to be done once.

The core system in *D3* strays away from what was seen in previous titles. There are still a series of classes to select from (Demon Hunter, Barbarian, Wizard, Witch Doctor and Monk) but they have changed the fundamentals of levelling. The skill tree that was present in previous games is gone and has been replaced with class attributes. Skills are automatically unlocked as the character gains levels. There are modifiers on each specific skill with options to tweak the specific skill sets. It encourages a new sense of flexibility and experimentation many veteran players may feel with the limited customization that is present by default.

Potions are also changed from previous games. Before it would be standard practice to keep using the health potions to get by harder enemies but Blizzard have added a cool down timer on the health potions and also added health globe pickups that will instantly fill some life after they are collected. Scrolls of town portal and identification have also been removed in favour of a more streamlined system of always available abilities that can be used when needed. These changes keep game play flowing and reduce the pointless inventory management all these spells took up. It makes for a much more fluid play experience that feels more modern.

The visuals are stunning yet familiar and although the game has been improved dramatically over previous titles it still maintains the feel of the older games. Even with this familiarity, Blizzard has done some amazing things with tone and mood. Each location feels unique, the creatures and landscape all create an atmosphere that shows the craftsmanship put into the game. The subtle lighting effects and interactive elements make this feel like a living breathing festering world that must be saved. The only criticism is that the last chapter of the game feels rushed. It has some of the most interesting visual flourishes and yet it feels like the place that the least time is spent. It would have been nice to see more of this area along with a longer last act.

The difficulty in the game is slightly easier than previous titles. It takes a few acts for the difficulty to ramp up enough to cause any real challenge. In later acts of the game it can be a struggle to take down all the enemies that are thrown at you depending on the class that was picked. Beyond this, there is a range of difficulties that the player can look forward to if they choose. Once a player has finished a difficulty the subsequent difficulty will become unlocked (nightmare, hell and inferno) these difficulties are built for higher level play and pose real challenges. Unless you have the proper gear and skills equipped these can result in many deaths.

Thankfully Blizzard has also added three unique companions to the game that can aid in areas that the class of choice may be lacking. The ranged class, a magic class and a melee class each with ability to level and customize that will best fit your play style. Sadly, only one can be taken into battle at a time and they cannot join a party if you are playing co-op but since they are only there to aid in single player this is not a major concern.

The biggest concern to many players is the digital rights management or DRM that requires a constant connection to Battle.net. This is partially to address the auction house that is always accessible to players along with the drop in co-op that Blizzard have added into the game. It also means the single player game can be held hostage when the connection or server problems abound, something that's already happened with regular frequency. That problem, combined with some surprising lag issues, make this need for a connection a serious, unnecessary and crippling black mark on an otherwise solid package.

The multiplayer should not underestimated though; it's easy to get a co-op game going and the fact creatures scale to the number of players make it a joy to jump online and take on some of the harder monsters in the game. The challenge forces teamwork. If you get a lone wolf that joins your game and runs off, it helps no one as it just spawns more monsters with none of the benefits of teamwork. There is the omission of any official voice chat, but it's fixed with third party software. It should be noted that PvP is planned for the game and has been shown but will be arriving in a patch at a later date.

Despite some issues, *Diablo III* is the new king of the action RPG genre. It is a full package with breathtaking visuals and a great loot system that will keep players going for years to come. Not only is *Diablo III* the best of the *Diablo* series but it is possibly the best Action RPG to date. It will be interesting to see what the competition comes up with to try and take on this series, but for now this is a must own for anyone interested in loot driven games or RPG's in general. C&G

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Future Soldier

REVIEW BY: Tim Ashdown

SYSTEM [illegible] DEVELOPER [illegible] PUBLISHER [illegible] ESRB M

90/100

A Long Time Coming

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Future Soldier (*GRFS*) was first announced to be in development way back in January of 2009 and over the past few years has had many "projected" release dates. As those dates came and went and the release was pushed back time and time again, many people thought that this latest addition to the *Ghost Recon* series would never see the light of day. As I've said before, I am not personally dismayed by the delays that plague most games in this industry. Typically, I find that delays do nothing but change a marketing strategy which has no bearing on whether or not a game is any good. In my opinion I would rather see a game delayed for polish and quality than see an inferior product released into the market. When a game is rushed, everyone loses; the publisher, the developer and most importantly the consumers. I am really glad that the developers at Ubisoft Red Storm, Ubisoft Paris, and Ubisoft Bucharest took their time to get *Future Soldier* working and looking great. This long development time allowed them to do it right and let me tell you, *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier* does a lot of things right.

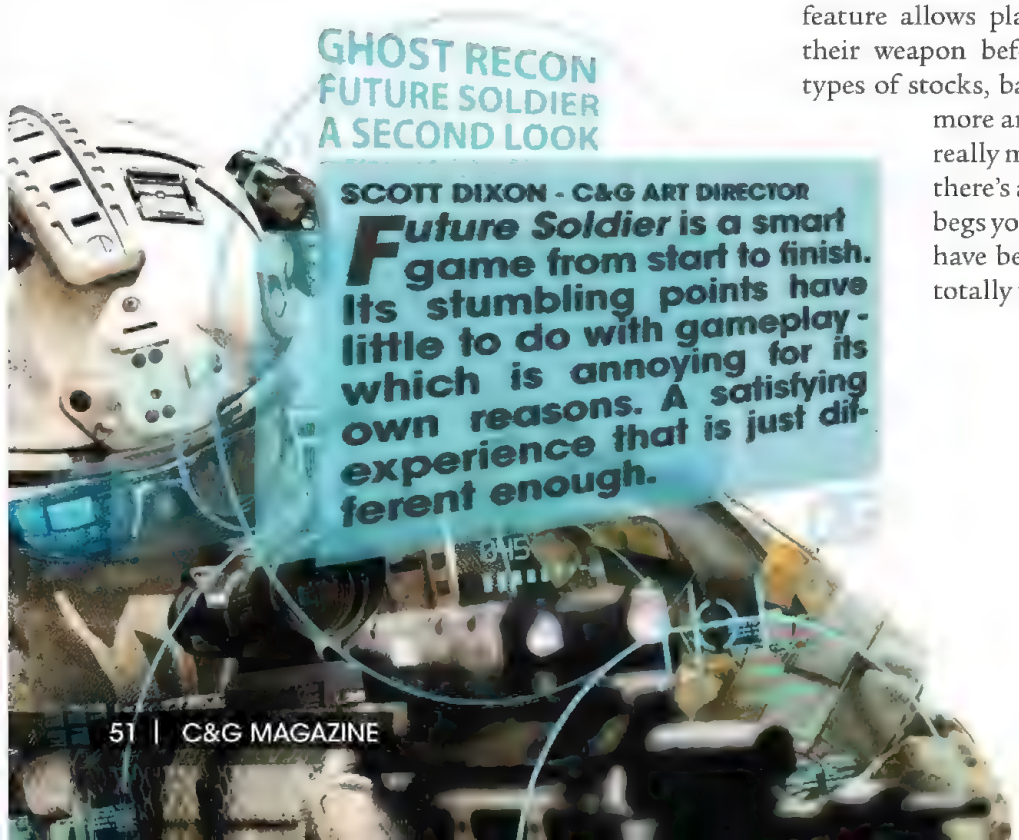
Near Future Warfare

In *GRFS* you play as a member of an elite, special-forces team simply known as "Ghosts," unit code name "Hunter". The game begins with a dramatic scripted scene in which another Ghost team falls victim to a dirty bomb attack while trying to secure the weapon from an unknown faction. It does not go well for the team. After the attack, you take on the role of another Ghost team consisting of four members; Kozak, Pepper, Ghost Lead and the always mouthy 30K. You'll spend all of your time during the single-player campaign playing as Kozak but since all the missions in the campaign may be played cooperatively with friends online, you may find yourself donning a different code name from time to time outside of the single-player campaign. Although the campaign is a good length, has a decent story, and features a wide variety of missions I think that the co-op mode may be where the real heart of this game lies. Your squad's AI controlled teammates do a good job of using cover and approaching objectives tactically but playing through the campaign with a solid group of tight-knit friends adds an excellent of layer of camaraderie as well as challenge. Coordinating an assault with the AI teammates is pretty easy because they listen to your commands, but once you have humans controlling your teammates they can choose whether to listen or not, which may lead to some satisfying cooperation or some frustrating SNAFUs. It's a great feature and one that isn't too common in the shooter genre. I was really glad to see it.

Go Go Gadget... Everything!

GRFS features a myriad of techno-warfare gadgets at your disposal throughout the campaign. Being set in the near future and based on real technology lends a certain amount of plausibility to the gadgets. One of the most useful is the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Drone which is a small remote controlled UAV allowing you to scout ahead, plan, and coordinate your assault on enemy positions. Using the drone allows you to mark enemy contacts for your teammates to target, resulting in a deadly synchronized attack which, if done correctly, allows you to avoid an all-out fire fight with the enemy. *GRFS* really is a thinking person's shooter. It encourages you to slow down your pace and approach situations in a tacti-

cal manner. There's also a wide variety of "Challenges" that can be completed while on missions which again encourage this tactical approach. Despite the pace being slower than what I'm used to with other contemporary shooters, I found it very enjoyable and exceptionally satisfying when a plan came together. Another one of the main gadgets at your disposal is active camouflage. Since stealth is a big part of almost every mission this is one gadget that will get used almost constantly. It's not perfect and you still need to make use of cover to avoid being spotted but it's really cool when oblivious patrols walk right by you as you have them zeroed for a headshot. However, I did have one issue with the camouflage though. At certain points during the campaign you will come up against enemy spec-ops forces who use the same technology. The game's engine seemed to have some trouble processing all the graphical trickery when more than just your squad had their camouflage activated. This caused the game to chug from time to time. I might not have noticed except that this seemed to be when I was right in the middle of a fire-fight, and a game dropping frames while you're targeting enemies can be frustrating. That said, everything else graphically that was done in-engine looked great despite this being the same YETI engine that powered the previous two *Ghost Recon* games. If I hadn't looked it up I would never have guessed that *GRFS* was running on an engine that is more than five years old. The development teams at Ubisoft did a great job of squeezing every bit of juice out of the YETI engine and the game looks great because of it. My favourite gadget was the "War Hog" which is a remote controlled mech that is based on the real life tech of the military's "Big Dog". It was pretty much a walking mortar/rocket launcher that devastated enemies even when they were behind cover, with the help of the "War Hound" I was able to make it through that particular mission without firing a single round from my rifle.

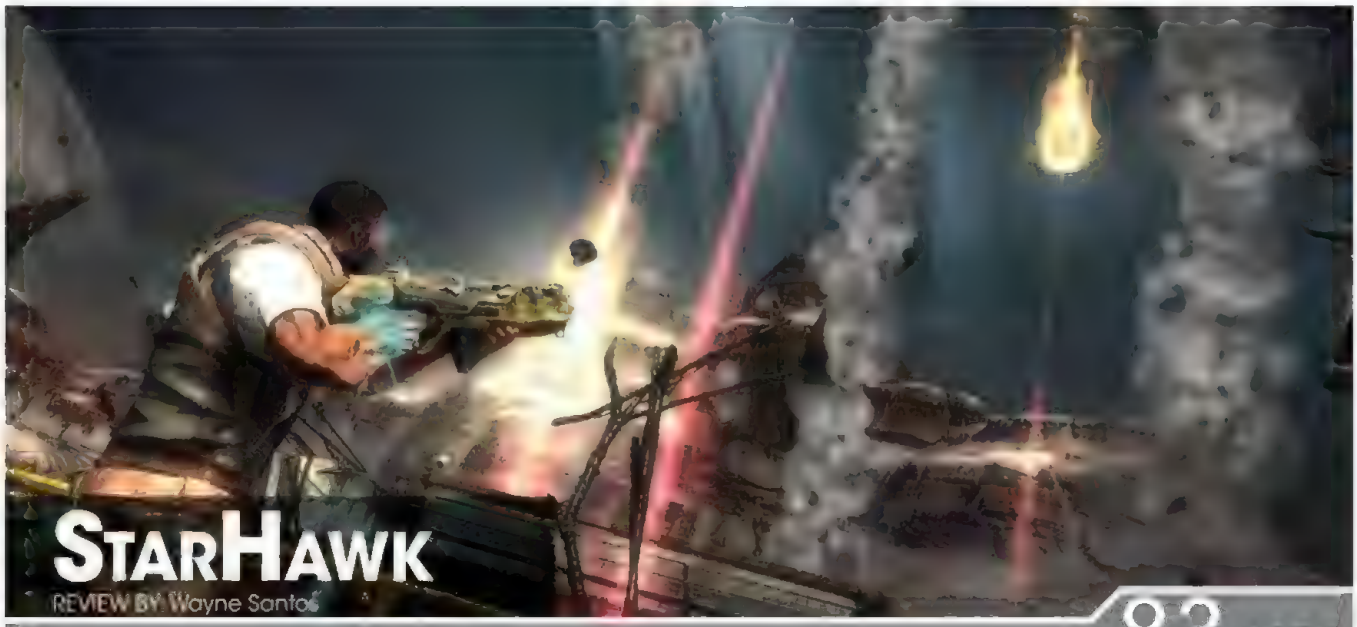

GHOST RECON
FUTURE SOLDIER
A SECOND LOOK
SCOTT DIXON - C&G ART DIRECTOR
Future Soldier is a smart game from start to finish. Its stumbling points have little to do with gameplay - which is annoying for its own reasons. A satisfying experience that is just different enough.

A Discrepancy

There is a part of *GRFS* that drove me absolutely bananas and not in a good way. Despite everything done in-engine looking great, the cut scenes looked pretty terrible at times. Don't get me wrong they were well written and well acted, but I noticed quite a few technical hiccups. Frame drops, pop-ins, bad lip-sync and some just plain awful looking character models really bothered me, and maybe that's why I think that the gameplay looked so good. This contrast sometimes made me feel like I was playing two different games. It is possible that some of the cut scenes were from an earlier build of the game and didn't receive the same amount of polish as others. But aside from the aforementioned camouflage problem, everything outside of the cut scenes looked fabulous and that's really what matters.

Give These Guys A Medal

Given the delays I was a bit sceptical when I first started playing *GRFS* and then when I saw some of the cut scene issues I got worried, but I stayed with it and came out on the other side as one satisfied gamer. *GRFS* was a very enjoyable experience for me and I would recommend it to anyone that is looking for a shooter that requires a little more thought than just pulling a trigger. As a whole the *GRFS* package is also pretty robust. The campaign is a good length, the story is compelling enough, albeit a little hard to follow at times but fans of Tom Clancy will feel right at home. There's the main single-player campaign which as I mentioned before is completely playable with your friends, online multiplayer, and another mode called "Guerrilla" which is similar to the "Horde" mode from the *Gears of War* series or the "Spec-ops" mode found in the *Modern Warfare* series. For those hardcore firearms enthusiasts out there *GRFS's* "Gunsmith" feature allows players to customize up ten parts of their weapon before a mission or match. Different types of stocks, barrels, scopes, magazines, and much more are all available to you so that you can really make every weapon your own. Overall, there's a lot in the *Future Soldier* package that begs you to spend money on this title. It may have been a long wait but I feel that it was totally worth it. C&G



StarHawk

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS3 **DEVELOPER:** LightBox Interactive **PUBLISHER:** Sony Computer Entertainment **ESRB:** M

83/100

The Battle To Build

Warhawk was a game that didn't attract the gamers in droves, but for those who answered the call, it provided a complex, engaging and frenetic multiplayer-only experience that rewarded those willing to stick with its steep learning curve. Now the remnants of Incognito have reformed into LightBox, and they bring with them a bigger, faster, more complex competitive multiplayer experience that might just be the best thing to play on the PS3 if you like strategically shooting other people.

Unforgiven In Space

Emmett Graves is a Rift Salvager, a hired gun that works security protecting the mining operations of "Rift Energy," the central resource of the game that makes it possible to fuel and/or construct everything from a sniper's tower to a transformable combat mech. When he's called back to his old hometown for a job, he finds himself going up against the most intelligent and organized band of Outcasts—humans mutated by overexposure to Rift energy—he's ever fought with. Things go from bad to worse in this story that could have—in the hands of more capable story-tellers—been a compelling tale of family and redemption. Instead, we see a promising plot that really should have been in a less action oriented game in order to give it the space it needed to realize its potential.

Fortunately for *Starhawk* the strength of this game rests not in the story it's trying to tell, but in the concept of many players driving cars, hover bikes and transforming mecha in order to kill each other. And in the graphics area, it manages to hold its own. This game won't be winning awards for sheer artistic achievement, but it presents a variety of landscapes—from dusty plains to plainly alien worlds—with some flair and colour. This is a western in space, and the art team has managed to evoke that sense of desolation in all the environments. More importantly, they've managed to achieve this with little sacrifice to performance. Barring connection problems which are not the fault of the game, when there are ships, men, and other vehicles all zooming around and firing at each other, the game manages to keep frame rates going without a significant hitch, and environments—despite being pretty large—keep the pop-up and draw-in to a minimum. For a multiplayer game, these are pretty important factors and LightBox clearly gets that. It's even more impres-

...a dynamic, unpredictable struggle, where teamwork is absolutely essential to victory.

sive when you consider how open-ended the combat can be, what with robots transforming into fighters and taking to the sky to duke it out in aerial combat while people below regularly hop into tanks and start shelling things with heavy artillery.

Sound comes with some pretty high expectations considering this is a shooter, but *Starhawk* delivers. There are explosions, gunfire, bursts of energy, and all of it is well represented for people with the audio equipment to take advantage of the directional sound. The music manages to surprise, with compositions that evoke the twangy, lonely mood of the old west that *Starhawk* is clearly inspired by. Chris Lennertz, the composer, understood the tone of the game, and it's a unique, distinctive set of tracks he's crafted for it. You still get a soaring orchestral score when a player takes to the skies in the titular Starhawk fighter, but you also get harmonicas, bluegrass, and the sense that tumbleweed is threatening to blow by any second when you drive by a dusty, empty town, in true western fashion. The voice acting is decent, with veteran Khary Peyton doing a respectable job of delivering some not very compelling dialogue. Ultimately it's not the actual quality of the performances that are a let down here, so much as the failure of the story and dialogue to live up to the promise of the premise.

Battle Tanks Now On Amazon With Free Shipping

Let's just get this out of the way right at the start; the single weakest link in the chain that is *Starhawk* is the single-player campaign. LightBox is a developer that understands multiplayer and that expertise is definitely on show here. Unfortunately that also makes it very obvious just how little experience they have in the single-player arena. While it's a given that most games with a multiplayer component will use the campaign as a "tutorial with a plot" in order to get players up and running with the fundamental mechanics of a combat system, they usually attempt to do so in a compelling, entertaining way. LightBox failed in this regard, creating a campaign that is essentially a one player version of the infamous Horde Mode from *Gears of War*. Players will see all the maps, and they will go through each chapter, dutifully calling down new equipment from the "Build" menu, but they will do it exactly the same way each time; they'll take down some existing enemies, get a warning that more are incoming, and then have a short amount of time to build some defences while a timer counts down to the next wave. Aside from the actual variety that comes from the way the players themselves choose to approach each situation—which is admittedly pretty diverse—the mission structure of the game itself doesn't deviate from this recurring series of enemy waves. Other games might give you escort missions, a secret rendezvous, or a WWII-style Normandy-esque massive assault that you take part in switch things up, but *Starhawk's* single-player mode is slavishly focused on its wave-based combat. By the third chapter, it starts feeling monotonous and that feeling never really goes away until an honest-to-goodness boss fight occurs in the concluding chapter. It's obvious Sony really needed to build this campaign in to justify the full $60 price tag on this game, but it's equally obvious that for the people who did their homework and know what they're getting into with *Starhawk*, this is a disposable experience they might be better off abandoning after getting their feet wet in the first chapter or two. There's an option to play this in co-op, even using local split-screen, but then it just ends up feeling even more like Horde Mode, though it's also easier to manage certain chapters.

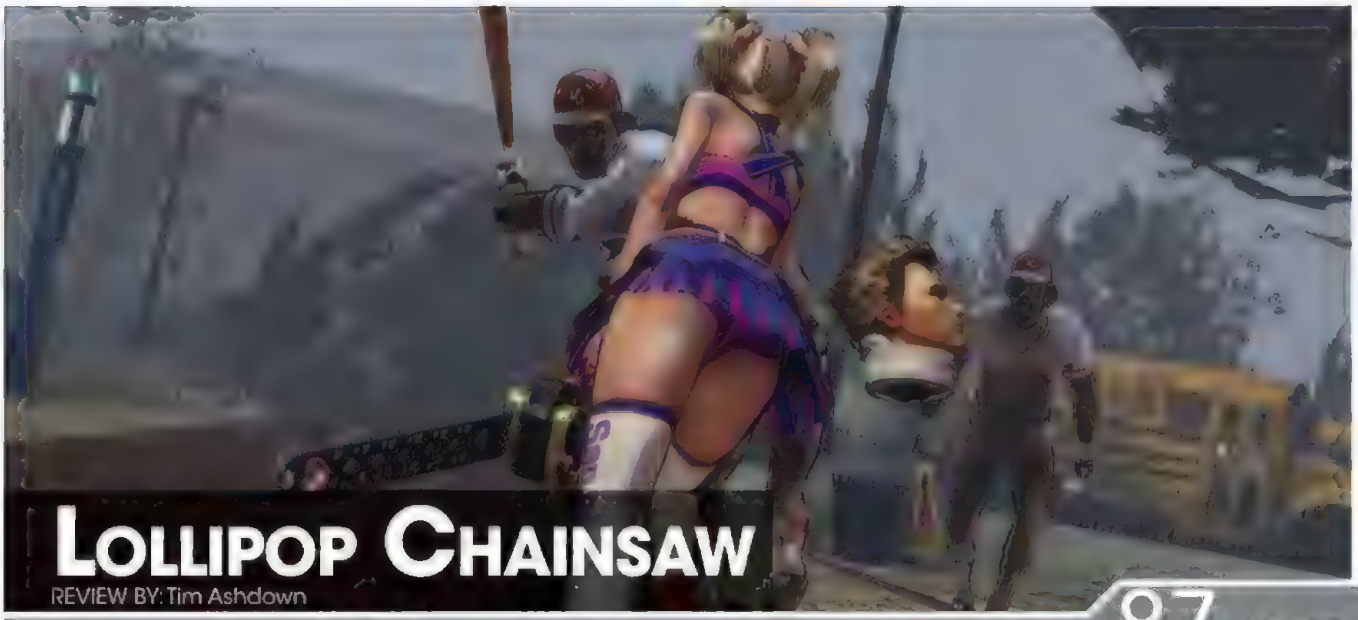
The main event is, of course, the multiplayer, and it's here that the game really shines. First up, the controls for the game do a great job of tweaking the handling and responsiveness regardless of which vehicle you're using. Whether you're just running around on your own with a rocket launcher, or driving around in a tank to deliver some heavy artillery to the enemy base, each control set up feels distinct and has its own quirks that you need to take into account in order to be an effective fighter. This more true in the eponymous Starhawk fighters than anywhere else. It's absolutely essential that they got this right, because when it comes time to jump into multiplayer, things can descend into chaos and you'll need those tight controls to get the job done.

Starhawk plays it very conservatively with its modes, giving us just Deathmatch, Team Deathmatch, Capture The Flag, and "Zones," which is about just another territorial control variant. That doesn't seem like a lot of play variety, but all the flexibility of this game comes from its "Build n' Battle" mechanic. This is a real-time strategy "lite" concept where players are constantly accumulating "rift energy," the basic resource for construction. Get enough of it, and you can call down everything from a sniper tower to a launch pad for the transformable combat mech known as the Starhawk. Kill enemies and you get even more rift energy. In some ways, this almost feels like the concept Double Fine was grasping for when they attempted to marry an action game to an RTS in *Brütal Legend*, but *Starhawk* got the mix right. The Build n' Battle mechanic transforms the game from a straightforward, competitive multiplayer experience into a dynamic, unpredictable struggle, where teamwork is absolutely essential to victory. With the ability to create installations and vehicles, at a moment's notice, it is the quick thinkers and strategists who know how to use these assets that will rule over the *Modern Warfare* player who merely runs and guns with no thought to tactics or teamwork. As to be expected in this day and age, an RPG-esque mechanic exists for levelling up, allowing for a greater degree of customizing avatar appearance as well as acquiring skill points to distribute. The skill points further help customize play-style preferences by giving perks like increased rift energy accumulation for people that prefer to hang back and reinforce the base, or combat bonuses for those that prefer to take it to the enemy.

If there's any one weakness to the actual gameplay itself, it lies in the basic infantry game. That's no real surprise; in a game where any player can call down a building or vehicle at any time, infantry is likely to be underpowered. This is probably going to be the biggest adjustment that players will have to make, accepting the fact that they are underpowered. Assault vehicles, tanks and even anti-air turrets are all much more valuable than just a guy with a gun, although even a single infantry soldier is still capable to taking down a Starhawk with rocket launcher and some skill. But there's a clear disadvantage to the soldier here, so if you're not into vehicular combat, or building things, this is an imbalance that might be a deal breaker.

The online infrastructure for the game is well-considered, with many of the standards that players have come to expect, like match-making, clans, and even a few extra surprises. There's an "MP Homeworld," feature, which is really just a "lobby" of sorts for players to hang out in from one of the maps in the game, where they can build, tool around in vehicles and socialize with others. There's also an option to visit the maps solo, so players can drive or fly around at their leisure and familiarize themselves with the combat area. Little touches like this show that LightBox has been listening to the feedback from fans and have made *Starhawk* one of more the comprehensive, player-friendly multiplayer experiences on the PS3.

One that you might have been waiting gunners, but for people looking for something beyond the die & respawn antics of *Call of Duty*, this is a welcome change of pace. CG



LOLLIPOP CHAINSAW

REVIEW BY: Tim Ashdown

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360 **DEVELOPER:** Grasshopper Manufacturer **PUBLISHER:** WB Interactive **ESRB:** M **87** / 100

What do you get when you mix together equal parts rainbows and zombies, throw in a cup of rock and roll and boil until sweet, then serve sprinkled with the warped sense of humor of Suda51? Chances are you'll get the latest game from Warner Bros. Interactive and Grasshopper Manufacture, *Lollipop Chainsaw*. It's sounds like an odd recipe but it does taste awfully good. In *Lollipop Chainsaw* you play as Juliet Starling, just your average American high school cheerleader who wakes up on the morning of her 18th birthday to find that her hometown of San Romero has been overrun by hoards of the undead. Oh and did I mention that in addition to her ra-ra-responsibilities she's also a seasoned zombie hunter? Because that's kind of important. Joined by her perverted sensei and body-less boyfriend Nick, Juliet must discover who's behind this totally uncool plot before everything she loves becomes icky, gross and dead.

Sparkle Hunting

There's some really odd juxtaposition going on in *Lollipop Chainsaw*. Since it's a zombie killing game you'll find tonnes of blood and guts and acts of violence but when Juliet takes her chainsaw to the heads of the undead you'll most likely be shown more rainbows and stars than anything else. As a matter of fact if you kill three or more zombies at one time your treated to the awesomely positive experience known as Sparkle Hunting. By Sparkle Hunting you'll earn bigger rewards which come in the form of zombie medallions which you can use at the in-game store to unlock new combos, upgrade your health or even purchase new outfits for our heroine. In addition to Sparkle Hunting the combat has a good amount of depth to it. You'll need to stun zombies with you pom pom bashes before they are weak enough to be decapitated so it's to your benefit to try and push zombies all together before whipping out the chainsaw. There's a few combos that can be unlocked as you progress through the game and some special moves which normally involve Juliet's boyfriend Nick who hangs from her belt. In order to execute these special moves you'll need a power-up called a "Nick ticket" which I found to be pretty rare. I would have liked to have used more of these comically cute special moves but never had many tickets during my play through. If you have the medallions for it you can purchase "Nick Tickets" as well as health replenishing lollipops at the in-game store, an aptly named website called "Chop2Shop.zom".

Painting The Town Pink

In order to unearth the zombie apocalypse plot you will find yourself fighting through stages with their own unique elements and theme. Of course there's San Romero High where I had to save classmates and do battle with zombified teachers and O'Bannon farm where 'shroom trips and hippy jam concerts are all too common but my favorite level was the Gulci Fun Center. This stage took place in a building built in the shape of a giant arcade cabinet and is where things got funky and very videogamey. Throughout the stage I had to navigate mini-games which were takes on classic arcade titles like *Pac-Man* and *Elevator Action*, *Elevator Action* being one of my favorite classic games. While every stage was unique, that was just the tip of the iceberg because the boss battle are where the heart of this game lies. You see, in addition to the normal zombies of this apocalypse there are also five "dark purveyors" who have been released upon San Romero and each one takes the form of a Zombie Rock Lord. The first of which is a punk rock zombie named Zed who is voiced by Little Jimmy

Urine from the band *Mindless Self Indulgence* who also composed the soundtrack for all the boss fights in the game. I'd tell you more about the other zombie bosses but I feel it might spoil the game, lets just say there's some rock n' roll, a few sitar riffs, and a whole lotta auto-tune. The level design was one of my favorite parts of the game, each one was unique and had different challenges that kept me playing just to see what I got to do next.

It's not all sunshine and rainbows

Despite the unique level design and decently deep combat I did have a few issues with *Lollipop Chainsaw*, the most frustrating of which was the camera. Most of the time I had control of the camera and could move it using the right analog stick but there were times where it was locked and I would find myself unable to see what I was fighting. I also found the enemy lock on feature to be useless as I was rarely ever fighting only one zombie at a time. I found it much more effective to just let the combat free flow. The other thing that bothered me is that this game could have looked way better. This late into the console life cycle I'm used to games looking a certain way and I though that some of the graphics looked a little on the rough side. That said, it didn't take much away from my experience I just wish the in-game animations and character models had looked a little better.

Don't Be Afraid to Laugh A Little.

When all is said and done I need to hand it to Grasshopper Manufacture, *Lollipop Chainsaw* is a blast from start to finish. The combat is fun, the soundtrack is kick ass, and the levels and boss fights are some of the most unique experiences I've had in a long time. The game as a whole is great piece of horror comedy that is on par with films like *Cabin in the Woods* and *Army of Darkness*. It also features some really stellar banter between Juliet (Tara Strong) and Nick (Micheal Rosenbaum). Their love story and dialogue had me laughing and saying "awwwww" throughout most of the game. *Lollipop Chainsaw* is a great take on American pop culture and the horror genre. I would recommend having a sense of humor as a prerequisite before playing, because if you take this game too seriously you'll miss out one funniest experiences I've had all year. CGM

A SECOND LOOK AT LOLLIPOP CHAINSAW

BY WAYNE SANTOS - REVIEWS EDITOR

Lollipop is, from top to bottom, a Suda51 game. Suda plays with the form of gaming, and therels a random, psychotic quality to it that is both unapologetically Japanese, and uniquely Suda. However, it's also the most mainstream release with a heavy dose of Americana at the forefromt. It's a game you play for the atmosphere, not the mechanics, as the controls dont compete with the responsiveness of a Platinum game like *Bayonetta*, and it's pretty short, clocking in at 4 - 6 hours. A must for Suda51 fans.

Sniper Elite V2

REVIEW BY: Tim Ashdown

SYSTEM: PC, PS3, X... 360 DEVELOPER: ... PUBLISHER: ... ESRB: M

79 / 100

I'd never thought I'd say this but I'm glad to see that World War II is back. If you'd asked me five years ago what needs to change about the games that are being made I would have said that we need to get away from WWII. These days it's the near modern time period that is the go to setting for shooters and after playing almost every one of them I've finally gotten to the point where I'm over the contemporary modern shooter. This year we've already seen the beginnings of the paradigm shift to the future of warfare. One only need look to Ubisoft's *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier* and Activision's upcoming *Call of Duty* title *Black Ops 2* to see that contemporary shooters are on the way out. That said, lately I've been in the mood for a good throwback to a time when the world was at war with itself and heroes were not made by the gadgets they carry but rather the guts and hearts contained within themselves. This was my mindset when I began playing Rebellion Software's latest title *Sniper Elite V2*.

In this follow up to 2005's *Sniper Elite* you are OSS operative Karl Fairburne a lone marksman inserted deep behind enemy lines in 1945. It's the closing days of the war in Europe and the Germans are trying to turn the tide of the war back in their favor with their secret super weapon, the V-2 Rocket. Many scientists who worked on the V-2 rocket program are still at large and it's up to you to recruit them for work in the USA or at least prevent their expertise from Soviet acquisition. During your mission you will be tasked with dispatching high value targets and infiltrating secret weapons research facilities so that V-2 rocket technology doesn't fall in the wrong hands.

One Shot One Kill

There are a few things I enjoy about sniping games one is that you are most often alone. Don't get me wrong there are times where I enjoy the macho camaraderie of some squad mates, but there's something very satisfying about completing a mission with no back up and no support, it's just you and your trusty rifle. The other thing I enjoy about sniping games is how satisfyingly awesome kills can be and this is one particular aspect that *Sniper Elite V2* got bang on. Not only do you have to account for target movement, noise, bullet drop and on higher difficulty settings wind, but when you pull the trigger it is obviously a hit or miss scenario. Miss and you'll most likely be spotted and in this game that is a very bad thing. Hit and you are treated to some of the goriest kill shots I've ever seen, but more about that later.

Think Before You Shoot

Sniper Elite V2 features a lot of stealth based gameplay. Oftentimes you'll have to make your way through or around many enemy patrols without being spotted or heard. The enemy A.I. is decently intelligent when investigating noises that seem out of place in war torn Berlin. However if you want to mess them right up, all you have to do is throw a rock. They will spend more time investigating the rock than most police detectives spend on murder cases. If the enemy does happen to find you they are very quick to raise the alarm and bring in reinforcements, and as I mentioned before this is a very bad thing. Enemy troops are absolutely deadly up close so you are always better off staying up high where they may not be able to reach you. If they do manage to reach you or flank your position, it's quite difficult to take them on with mid-range weapons and the rate of

fire on sniper rifles will most likely get you killed before you can get a second shot off. I found the sneaking, careful planning of your route to observation points, target identification, and finally target eradication all to be really well executed which made for a slower paced yet ultimately satisfying experience.

Missing the Mark

Despite my enjoyment of the slow pace, there were quite a few times where I felt missions went on too long or that I found myself in very unbalanced encounters. Picture this; I'm hundreds of meters away hunkered down in an elevated position. The enemy troops are aware of my position since I just splattered the brains of their squad mates across the ruined landscape of Berlin. As I try and take out the few foot soldiers that remain I find myself constantly under fire from enemy troops wielding what are supposed to be inaccurate sub machine guns like the MP 40 yet they seem to be deadly accurate. There were more than a few times where I just didn't understand how, given the weaponry available at the time, German and Soviet troops were able to be so accurate from a distance. Another thing that I did find out of place was Fairburne's ability to slow down time. I get that it's best practice to hold your breath when taking a shot but holding one's breath shouldn't make enemy troops run in slow motion. I also could have done without a red dot appearing in my sniper scope indicating where my bullet was going to go. This indicator may be absent at higher difficulties but while playing on normal I found it made the game too easy and eliminated some of the challenge that I would have enjoyed. I know that I praised the enemy A.I. earlier but that was only while I was sneaking around. Once enemy troops were aware of me they relegated themselves to running around with their proverbial heads cut off, making them easy targets.

I'm glad to see that World War II is back.

Kill Shots Are Never Boring

However, there were other things I enjoyed about *Sniper Elite V2*. To be honest I thought the game looked really good. The environments were decently detailed and the character models were pretty well done. But nothing looked as good as the "X-Ray Kill Cam" which is one of the game's main features. At first I thought that watching a bullet travel through an enemy's skull and out the other side would get boring after a few kills but boy was I wrong. No matter how many times I saw it, watching skull, brain and sometimes lungs get shredded by my perfectly placed bullet never got old. Every bullet was pretty accurate as far as its trajectory was concerned which provided dynamic entry and exit points for each shot, keeping all those bloody, ultra-violent kills fresh.

Sniper Elite V2 isn't a perfect game but it is one of the better sniping focused games available. I was pretty disappointed with City Interactive's *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* in 2010 and found that *Sniper Elite V2* was superior in almost every way. *V2* is also a great upgrade from the original which was also done by Rebellion back in 2005. I enjoyed a lot of this game but wish that as much accuracy and attention to detail had been placed on the enemy weaponry as my own. CGG

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 4: EP.2

REVIEW BY: Adam Chapman

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360, iOS, Android, PC, **DEVELOPER**: SEGA, Dimps **PUBLISHER**: SEGA **ESRB**: E

65 / 100

Although I've never been the biggest fan of *Sonic the Hedgehog*, I have generally enjoyed the various Sonic games that have been released throughout the years. I absolutely loved the precursor to this game, *Sonic the Hedgehog 4: Episode I*, as it was a nice throwback to the original Sonic games, but with updated HD graphics, refined controls and a new mechanic to update the character's moves. For better or for worse, I was hoping for more of the same from this new release, something which managed to capture the fun and spirit of the original Sonic games, without making the game too complicated. I was also excited at the prospect of seeing Tails back in the game, as I always enjoyed playing *Sonic 2* just to see Sonic's fox sidekick.

Unfortunately, the game didn't end up being what I had hoped. This is a better/worse situation, however, because your personal view of this game will depend largely on what you were hoping to get out of it. For better or for worse, I was hoping for a game which was a sequel to *Episode I* without introducing any unnecessary tweaks, which would serve to complicate the enjoyable game play which was already pleasant. I didn't get that game, but fans who were hoping for a game that would tweak the traditional Sonic formula will be a bit happier with the overall result.

The addition of Tails is definitely an important factor in this game, as he's far more useful than I think he's ever been in prior iterations of the Sonic series. Depending on the situation, there are combo moves that can be pulled off with Tails, and in some cases it's crucial that these moves are executed in order to progress further in the levels. There are numerous parts in the game where Tails is necessary to do a particular act, and the game helpfully makes this easy to understand and follow. The levels look fantastic, as they are lush and memorable, although at times they verge on being overly complicated, instead of being complex. Similar to *Sonic CD*, there are multiple routes to completing each level, but the difficulty in some of the levels is a bit harsher than I would have expected. There are more traps and complex pathways to follow than ever before, but at times I found this to actually be a detriment to the overall game play. The boss battles are certainly more innovative than they have been in the past, but again I don't think they were necessarily successful. For most Sonic games, the boss battles have been extremely straight-forward, as they adhere to a particular formula, tried tested and true. With this game, the developers have switched things up, making the boss battles a tad more innovative and complex; in theory they are still the same, at their core. Sonic is still trying to bounce up and hit Dr. Robotnik, but there's more involved now in terms of figuring out just how to hit Dr. Robotnik in the first place. The difficulty in the boss battles is much higher, not necessarily because it's actually harder to defeat the boss; it's just much harder to figure out the method in which the game wants you to do so. It's not nearly as clear or concise as it could be, and it leads to frustrating periods of trial and error, detracting from the enjoyable flow of the game.

This game sees the return of the *Sonic 2*-style Special Stage instead of the *Sonic 1*-style Special Stage utilized in *Sonic 4 Episode I*. I've always preferred this style of Special Stage, and they play quite well with the updated graphics and physics of this game. In terms of collectibles, the Chaos Emeralds and standard Rings return from the first installment, with the addition of the Red Star Rings, which were seen in *Sonic Generations*. However this time around the Red Star Rings don't unlock a skill or artwork, as they did in *Sonic Generations*, but instead are simply necessary in order to attain 100%

completion for the game. By having more collectibles, it helps keep the game fresh, as gamers have a variety of different goals to achieve throughout their various playthroughs of the game. The various achievements/trophies that are available for the game assist with extending the game's playtime as well.

In terms of overall game play experience, the game adds Metal Sonic as a playable character, which was a surprise as I wasn't expecting him to be usable. I do have to credit the developers for this decision, as it allows them to build new levels around a similar-looking yet still different character. Using Metal Sonic is like playing the previous game, in that he's solo and doesn't have a sidekick to help him out. When playing as Metal Sonic, it also made me realize how much the game was built to rely upon using Tails when you're playing as regular Sonic. Having Tails as a sidekick has never been as functional or useful as it has been in this game, but the developers may have gone a little too far in making Tails an indispensable crutch that gamers can utilize while playing through the various levels.

This game tries too hard to develop new game mechanics and level designs, which I found at-times to be alienating and frustrating. In terms of the duration of game play provided by the game, there's more game play to be found here than in the previous iteration, thanks to the playable Metal Sonic levels. *Episode I* was a love-letter to classic *Sonic* games of the past, whereas this game reminded me more of *Sonic CD*, which unsuccessfully tried to alter the traditional '*Sonic*' formula. Although I credit the developers with trying to do something more with this franchise in this game, the changes were to the detriment to the game play experience overall. CGM

SORCERY

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM | DEVELOPER | PUBLISHER | ESRB

72 /100

Do You Believe In Magic?

Sorcery is finally here. The game that was initially heralded as the perfect ambassador for arguing Move's relevance to hardcore gaming has had an uneven journey on its road to retail. It first surfaced at E3 2010 where it showed off some unique interface mechanics, and then promptly disappeared from the radar as a slew of Wii knock-off games waggled their way onto Sony's motion control system. Well, now it's here, and while it can safely argued that it's the best Move game currently available, considering the competition, that's not saying much.

Harry Potter's More Irritating Jock Rival

Finn is a sorcerer's apprentice. Because this is an American game, unlike Harry Potter, Finn is not a polite, good natured, humble young man with a good heart and personality that he shares with a helping of kindness, honesty and loyalty to his friends. Instead, he is rude, smart-mouthed, and would likely be the kind of person that would have stuffed Harry Potter in a locker on his first day at Hogwarts for being a nerd wearing glasses. In other words, he's a typical American teenager, and thus perfect for that audience that equates "jerk" with heroic. When he ignores all common sense and opens the way for a great evil to enter the world due to pride and his own arrogance, he attempts to correct the wrong-doing so as not to get caught out on it by his master. Thus, with that incredibly noble quest set in his path, Finn sets out to do the right thing for all the wrong reasons.

Sitting down and watching the game in action is a much less irritating experience. The first and most important thing to note at the start is this Sony exclusive uses the Unreal engine. The PS3 is not terrific with the Unreal engine, not without a lot of work, and this game demonstrates that once again. The ferocious bloom lighting characteristic of an out of control Unreal engine is on show here, as are the occasional delayed lapses of proper texture resolution that Unreal is known for. Rocksteady with their take on *Batman* is still probably the best example the PS3 has of a game built on Unreal that doesn't show many performance issues. It's just surprising that even a PS3 exclusive couldn't quite hit the same mark. On the other hand, the frame-rate remains stable despite the graphic glitches. Players can rely on a technically solid gaming experience even when there are a lot of enemies spawning on screen. For a game made on Unreal, it's actually got its own distinct art direction that manages to avoid the shiny, Vaseline coated 'Roid Gorillas that the engine was born to render. This is a competent graphical job, neither riddled with glitches, nor lined with greatness.

The audio for *Sorcery* follows similar suit. With a fairy-centric tone, the music is full of Celtic influences and instruments like mandolins and hammered dulcimers, and it all comes through crisply and distinctly. As gamers have come to expect these days, the music is no slouch, assuming that you're into something like a cross between *Battlestar Galactica* and Loreena Mckennitt, that is. The audio effects are also competently done, and, as to be expected from a game focused on magic, "sparkly." Magic missiles, fire bolts, lightning and gusts of wind are all represented in the elemental magic used, as well as the obligatory grunting of bogeys, trolls and other monsters of Celtic myth. Everything is given adequate audio coverage, but again, none of it reaches the heights of some of the best audio seen in games such as the soundscapes of *Skyrim* or *Red Dead Redemption* with evocative mixes of ambient audio and music. The voice acting is effective, though obviously skewed towards a

younger, tween players. This is a game that knows its primary audience has an innate distrust of adults but is still too emotionally uncertain to be honest about their feelings and it all comes through in the insults that Finn and his magical cat companion hurl at each other constantly throughout the game. The actors have done a good job of portraying the awkwardness of teenagers in a difficult time, eschewing any kind of sense of timeless, fantasy dialog for straight up, colloquial delivery. I'm pretty sure "That's awesome," wasn't said with any regularity by teenagers of the medieval period, but it's still in usage in the fantasy land that Finn inhabits.

Flicking, Waving and Stirring to Victory

The big question that everyone likely has about *Sorcery* is, "Does the PlayStation Move work with it?" And the answer is mostly yes, with a couple of significant criticisms. This is a game that was touted, from the ground up to be a game that was Move-centric while still conveying a hardcore sensibility for the more serious gamers out there. The Workshop aimed for the moon, and they didn't quite get there, but they got out of orbit, at least, and that counts for something.

Sorcery is essentially a third-person action shooter, only instead of guns, you wave a wand around, shifting between various elements to do damage, or occasionally using other spells such as shapeshifting and telekinesis to negotiate certain obstacles. Almost everything in *Sorcery* could probably be done with a traditional controller, and some things like combat would probably be more responsive and accurate if they'd been given that option, but unlike *No More Heroes*—which is probably the closest thing this game has to a hardcore competitor—no such option exists. It's either Move or bust.

Players use either a Move navigation controller Dualshock in their left hand for the actual moving of Finn around. When it comes to the shooting, a combination of auto-targeting and some slight angle and motion detection come into play with the Move motion controller itself. Most of the time this is functional, especially during the course of normal play when the game only throws a few enemies at you. The game will normally lock on the closest foe, and you can run n' gun—or cast, as the case may be—flicking the Move controller forward to signal you want to unleash a magical bolt. If the enemy is elevated, you can raise your arm to shoot higher, and if the enemy is behind cover, you can actually apply a little "English" and whip the controller to side to give your bolt a curve to go around and behind cover to hit enemies hiding there. It's even more impressive when you're doing mundane things like breaking open the many vases, barrels and other Mandatory Videogame Boxes With Loot that litter the world. Standing near three vases, you can actually flick the controller to the left, right and center, and auto-targeting combined with motion detection is nuanced enough to tell the difference and take out each one in your desired order. There are also mini-games for the creation of permanent, stat-boosting potions that have you mixing ingredients *Macbeth* Witch-style, grinding up mushrooms, sprinkling essence of starlight and mixing the whole thing up before shaking the move controller to get your potion "fizzy" and then tilting it upwards to mimic taking a huge gulp. There's a cute sense of immersion to the motions that will likely tickle younger gamers with the enthusiastic embrace of the "let's pretend you're really a sorcerer" vibe the game is pushing. In that regard, as a game for the younger set, *Sorcery* is an unqualified success and any child that is still mooning over—or has yet to discover—the allure of *Harry Potter* will get a huge kick out of this game.

For those of who were wondering if this that fabled experience successfully married to the Move system, the answer is still a much less enthusiastic, "I suppose."

The Move mechanics work, there's no question of that. It just feels like some extra work is required in order to play it this way. This is most obvious during those sections where the player is taking on a horde of enemies instead of just a few. The game collapses under the weight of too many enemies attacking at the same

time, and its auto-targeting at these times rarely jibes with what players will want to do. If a giant troll is attacking you and you want to do some damage to him thanks to his vulnerability to fire, it's frustrating to have the game insist that what you must be trying to do is burn the bogeys next to him, despite the fact that they're not actually attacking you right now. This, combined with the lack of a controllable camera can turn those "horde mode" moments of the game into a nightmarish experiences that the developers hadn't intended. The Move system can also run into trouble once your repertoire of spells increases. Like I said, they want you using buttons as rarely as possible, so switching from fire to ice to wind requires gestures. While it's easy to switch to the default magic missile, which requires just pushing the Move button with your thumb, fire requires a downward half circle to the right, while lightning requires a straight slash from left to right, but lowered. As you unlock more of these elemental spells, the similarities in some of the motions pretty much guarantee that during hectic fights you're not always going to be switching to the element you wanted, with lightning—your most powerful spell—being the most difficult to access in high pressure situations. This can seriously work against you in a big way if you can't maintain your precision when combining elements, a major mechanic of combat. Players can do things like create a wall of fire, send a miniature tornado through it to create a fire tornado, and then fire magic missiles through said tornado that get spit out as fireballs. It's an effective tactic, but only if you can train yourself to maintain discipline and precision with your gestures. Few players will probably have the patience and determination to do this.

These two serious criticisms aside, the game plays adequately. When it's not acting up on you, Move works reasonably well. Be aware that the physical nature of constantly swinging and flicking your arm pretty much guarantees you won't want to be playing for more than a couple of hours straight to prevent serious muscle soreness. It's also not a very long game, clocking at 6-8 hours depending on player skill and difficulty level chosen. Is this the best Move game on the market? Considering how poor so many of the others are, yes, it is. Does that mean you should immediately go out and buy it? If you're looking for a demo piece for your Move system, or a game with a strong chance of enchanting younger players, definitely. I myself still found that the *No More Heroes* port to the PS3 was a more engaging, hardcore Move experience overall. *Sorcery,* however, is a mechanically superior game if you want something that shows off what your Move system can do. C&G

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RESISTENCE: BURNING SKY

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS Vita **DEVELOPER:** Nihilistic Software **PUBLISHER:** SCE **ESRB:** M

70 / 100

The Pocket Invasion

The Vita has now been kicking around for a few months, and in that time we've seen a slow trickle of games that sometimes make good use of the hardware, and are sometimes just ported over from the PlayStation Network. *Resistance: Burning Skies*, falls into the former category. It's not developed by the traditional stewards of the franchise, Insomniac Games, but Nihilistic Software has stepped up to the plate, and even if they haven't created a triumphant sequel for the series, what's there is still a competent shooter that is impressive for even being in this state on a portable platform.

We Didn't Start The Fire

In the alternate history 50s that is the *Resistance* setting, players take control of Tom Riley, a New York fireman that takes up arms against the Chimera when they finally invade the USA after having systematically assimilated the rest of the planet. This is where the story immediately starts to go off the rails a bit, as the primary games in the series put players in the shoes of a trained soldier, so a rationale—however flimsy—existed for why they'd be able to take up alien arms with such supreme confidence. A guy who puts out fires is likely not a seasoned marksman but Tom takes to the standard range of Chimera guns like he was born to it. You can see this story was put together thanks to a checklist of plot points, like a family in need of rescue, a plucky female supporting character, and authentic, period radio transmissions. Insomniac did all this with verve, style and a passion for the fiction of the world, whereas Nihilistic does it because Insomniac did it. There's no real pacing, no natural narrative arc that brings players to any sort of conclusion that feels earned.

Once we actually get into the presentation, the game does a competent job of showing off that the Vita is a decent piece of hardware, but it doesn't adequately represent its power. *Uncharted: The Golden Abyss* and even *Gravity Rush* are more technically accomplished displays of what the Vita can do can do when all cylinders are firing. *Burning Skies* with its occasional graphics glitches—like textures taking a while to load—and more simplistic level design, still look better than the average portable shooter, but don't rank amongst the best. Basic textures, the omnipresent "FPS brown" that smears the levels, and even the occasional NPC encountered as low poly characters all contribute to a game that, on a console, would scream "budget," but manages to be quite passable by portable standards. On the other hand, there's no screen tearing, and no drops in frame rate, despite the fact that the action can get quite hectic, so that's a definite win for *Burning Skies* and another vote of confidence for the Vita's processing power.

Sound fares a bit better. Once again, Nihilistic faithfully sticks to whatever internal bible has been written for the franchise, with a big, brassy orchestra that nails the mood, and more earnest voice acting particularly in the radio broadcast device liberally borrowed from *Resistance 3*. Because of the portable nature of the game, this isn't the kind of title that's ever going to bowl anyone over with the presence of its audio, but it's still highly recommended you play it with earphones. The FPS nature of the game ensures that some stereo directionality is still utilized, and Nihilistic has done a good job of playing effectively with filling the two channel sound as an ear phone experience.

The Safe FPS

Resistance: Burning Skies is a bit of a weird game to judge. On the one hand, you are playing an FPS on a portable system, and you're playing it exactly the way you're used to. Let me say that again, you're playing an *FPS on a portable system the way you're used to.*

On the other hand, as a *Resistance* game, it's probably the weakest entry in the series.

These are the two ways of looking at this game. As a product, on its own, it's a phenomenal technical accomplishment, and a fantastic endorsement of power of the Vita. I've actually played the game on subways, commuting, and I've gotten looks from bystanders who were impressed to see a hardcore game that looked great on a mobile platform. However, if you judge it by the standards of the console shooters, and the high watermarks we now have for them, this is a safe, by the numbers FPS that doesn't go out of its way to distinguish itself outside of its chosen hardware.

Nihilistic has followed the Insomniac template, using all the weapons now familiar to *Resistance* fans. You're still playing an FPS in an alternate history 50s under alien assault. You're still acquiring weapons that have a primary and secondary form of fire that really spice up how you want to approach combat. You're even still fighting most of the enemies you've encountered in past games. You're just doing it all on a portable system, with a sense of pacing and level design that never surpasses—or even equals—what the console relatives of this series have already accomplished. *Resistance 3* in particular did some very interesting things with verticality and layout of levels in some sprawling environments that took advantage of the weapon variety to encourage experimentation with some surprising, devastating results. *Burning Skies* rarely calls upon this kind of ingenuity, largely confining players to smaller, boxed-in areas with the obligatory cover to hide behind and enemies with straightforward combat AI that act in predictable, reliable ways. For any seasoned veteran of the FPS, this is a game that is not innovating in any way, nor is it necessarily failing hard at anything either, it's just planned out a careful, workable, safe path for success and meekly walked it. There's nothing about this game to hate. But there's nothing to really rave about either, except for the fact that it is a fully functioning FPS that works on a portable system.

There have been some interesting changes made to the gameplay to accommodate the transition to the Vita. Taking cover is a largely automatic process that smartly lets players "stick" to cover and break away when they feel like it, eliminating the accidental "gluing" to cover that normally occurs when the action is assigned to a face button. Players can peek out by using the D-Pad to lean and shoot. Nihilistic has actually executed this pretty well and rather than being compensation for a lack of extra shoulder buttons, it would be nice to see this mechanic

You're playing an FPS on a portable the way you're used to.

implemented into console games. Other changes are not so successful, like the mandatory usage of touch functions. Many of the secondary weapons require swipes and/or presses of the finger in order to be activated. This is workable in smaller fire fights, but with larger groups of enemies—when it the extra firepower would be a godsend—the forced touch makes it impractical. Five enemies all pounding on you simultaneously is not the time to take either your moving or firing hand away from the controls in order to swipe across a screen. However, the usage of double tapping the rear screen to run, or pushing the axe icon on the bottom right of the screen to initiate a quick melee strike work surprisingly well. All in all, it's a mixed result for the touch implementation, though clearly the weapons side of things is not working so hot.

In a move that might raise a few eyebrows amongst the hardcore, there's also a multiplayer component for the game. Like the rest of *Burning Skies* this is safe and uninspired, putting together up to eight players total in Death Match, Team Death Match, and "Survival" mode, where players fight against a horde, and anyone that dies joins the horde. Like most multiplayer games, *Burning Skies* incorporates the RPG-lite element of gaining XP that then translates into leveling up and getting bonuses to help out with play, but we've seen all this before, in many other games. On consoles, of course. No one's ever really seen it implemented this well on a portable.

This really is the dilemma of *Resistance: Burning Skies*. It's a competent if unremarkable FPS by console standards, which makes it something of a minor miracle on the Vita, since portables, up until now, have never really had this kind of playability with the genre. If you're looking at *Resistance: Burning Skies* as a fan of the franchise, hoping for an excellent addition to the family, you might want to steer clear of this, as it adds nothing, and rarely matches the excellence of the console series. If you're a Vita owner looking for a decent FPS to play just to show your friends it *can* be done on a Vita, you might want to pick this up. The game itself won't blow your socks off, but the fact that you're playing it without tearing your hair out on a portable will. CG

AKAI KATANA

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: Xbox 360 DEVELOPER: Cave PUBLISHER: Rising Star Games ESRB: T

80 / 100

The only Western fans of Japanese gaming that have it worse than the JRPG lovers are the shoot 'em up, or shmup, or "bullet hell" fans. This is one genre that has NOT fared well outside of Japan as gamers flock to the much more popular first person shooter. Blame it on skill levels going down, or tastes changing where Western gamers want see those bullets coming right at their face, rather than some abstract ship on the left/bottom side of the screen, but the days when intense shooters requiring warp-speed neural transmission were sitting at the top of the heap have long passed. So that's why in one sense, there's almost no point to this review. *Akai Katana* is a shmup, by the much loved shmup developer Cave. That right there is going to guarantee that for the starved fans of the genre, this is a guaranteed buy. Fortunately for them, they won't be disappointed.

A Million Holes In Its Own Plot

There actually is a story to *Akai Katana*, though it's hopelessly arcane for a game about dodging a lot and shooting everything that moves. In an alternate history version of our world, Taisho-era Japan comes across a power source known as Guiding Ore which essentially acts as cold fusion; a clean, near limitless supply of energy. Coal and primitive methods of electrical generation give way to this new power supply, and in short order, Japan uses this new found power to subjugate the nation, and then expand to the others surrounding it. A group of generals using the more mystical elements of this power source wreak havoc with the world, and it's up to a small group of freedom fighters—and their phantom guardians, which, thanks to Guiding Ore, they can summon up—to restore justice and freedom to the world. Again, by shooting everything that moves. It's a pointlessly elaborate story that seems to have been created in order to justify the idea that teen schoolgirls could pilot aircraft with unlimited amounts of ammo, and summon up pseudo-Yaoi guardians. It's not particularly well crafted, but it has just enough meat on its bones that somewhere, out there, a fan-fiction writer is already crafting lurid sexual encounters between the various characters.

Moving on to the presentation, what we're looking at here is a classic, 2D, raster-graphic, horizontally side-scrolling shooter. That pretty much translates to the strength of its graphical appeal coming down strictly to your own preferences in art design. I personally found that the art direction, while competent, wasn't that technically impressive, with other Japanese developers like Vanillaware—and titles like *Odin Sphere* and *Muramasa: The Demon Blade*—producing much more elaborate art work, and in greater variety. *Akai Katana* is actually a two year old arcade game coming to Western Xbox 360s embarrassingly late to the party, but even considering that, there have been a lot of interesting things done with traditional raster graphics even before 2010, so that hardly excuses the game. One of the most surprising things, from a technical standpoint, is the slow-down. Yup, even though this is an entirely 2D game with nary a polygon in sight, there are rare moments—usually when the term "bullet hell" is living up to its name—that the performance takes a hit. It's not often, but I did notice it during my play-throughs of the game. It's not a deal breaker by any means, though purists may balk at the unintentional "freebie" the game gives less skilled players by slowing down slightly during its most insane moments.

The sound of the game is pretty much text-book Japanese shmup. Rising Star didn't bother to localize any of the audio when they brought this game over, so unless you're fluent in Japanese, you'll be bombarded

with high-pitched squealing that you'll have to provide your own tentacle-assisted imaginary translations for. The music is similarly hyper-kinetic, threatening to burst a vein in its own figurative forehead with how fast-paced and excitable it gets, but again, this is an unapologetic, purely Japanese shmup and fans of the genre aren't getting anything here they're not already familiar with. It doesn't really do much for owners with a multi-surround speaker set up, but then it's a shmup. It doesn't have to.

Everything Wants To Kill You

The Shmup is a genre with pretty well-defined boundaries. You control your avatar—in this case, a plane—you dodge like crazy while a million buzillion things shoot 16 million buzillion bullets, and occasionally you fight bosses and mini-bosses that require a lot of shots to take out. Cave Interactive is one of the few developers out there still creating new love letters in the genre for fans, and *Akai Katana*, despite some minor performance issues, manages to satisfy that craving in a good way. In addition to the usual bullet hell conventions of special-attacks/smart bombs that obliterate everything on the screen, there's actually a fair amount of subtlety to this shooter that will require some quick thinking in addition to quick reflexes. The shooting has a few different modes, including a defensive mode, an offensive mode, and a more mobile mode. Offense does what you'd think, concentrating everything into firepower with the trade-off that you now move with less agility. The mobile mode compensates for this with more speed and zip, but you're not doing quite as much damage to your targets, which is a serious issue with mini-bosses and bosses. The defense mode is interesting because it kicks in when you either tap the shoot button once, or just don't' shoot at all. It attracts the energy pods that enemies dropped when killed, which contributes to an energy bar that will allow you to summon your phantom guardian. Invoke the phantom guardian and the defense mode now acts as invincibility, and all shots ricochet off the guardian, a handy ability to have in tight spots.

This adds an extra layer of strategy to the usual bullet hell proceedings, and gives the game some surprising depth. It's not easy to dodge an onslaught of enemy fire when there's only the tiniest opportunity to slip through, but it's made even more interesting by the phantom guardian option as well as the defense mode. In some ways, this game is going to be as much of a test of the player's ability to strategize in high pressure situations, as it is a test of the usual twitch reflexes. The game, mercifully for those willing to try a shmup for the first time, has unlimited continues that pick up right where you left off. The true test of the game, of course, will lie with those who compete on the ranked leaderboards, and try to finish the game on a single "credit," in true arcade aficionado style. There's also an option for a second player to join in, but traditional shmups are best played with a lone player testing his might against a ridiculous array of enemies.

If you're into shmups, you're going to buy this if you haven't already. It has minor performance issues, but otherwise delivers in all the ways that matter, with an added layer of complexity thanks to the firing modes and guardian companion mechanics. If you're never played a shoot 'em up before and are thinking of getting into it now, the gameplay itself is approachable for the open minded, but relentless Japanese-ness of the package may be off-putting to people that don't normally expect teen schoolgirls to save the day. CGG

GAME OF THRONES

REVIEW BY: Reid McCarter

SYSTEM: PC, PS3, Xbox 360 DEVELOPER: Cyanide PUBLISHER: Atari, Focus Home Interactive ESRB: M

61 /100

Game of Thrones, the latest videogame version of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, attempts to do everything right. Its developers, Cyanide, take into account the wild success of the televised adaptation and the story's ability to obliterate generations of fantasy tropes with its cynical view of morality, "righteous" warfare and, even, truth. The designers' attempt to bring Martin's complex politicking and multifaceted character creation into the best type of videogame to do so — the role-playing game — is an ambitious project, but one that ultimately fails to live up to either its source material or, worse, its own goals.

The basic conceptual choices behind the game are smart. Rather than drop players into a few of their favourite characters' boots and slot them into a previously told segment of the story, *Game of Thrones* creates a (almost) new cast, new locations and a new plot. Beginning just prior to the start of the first book/season of the television show, the videogame revolves around two protagonists, Mors Westford, a member of the west's devout group of protectors, the Night's Watch; and Alester Sarwyck, a priest of the eastern god R'hllor.

Mors and Alester function similarly to the books' point of view characters, their disparate paths and objectives working to piece together a larger overarching narrative. This plot unfolds through combat and exposition, bridged by exploration of confined environments. Battles are conducted through a system reminiscent of *Dragon Age's* real-time, attack-queuing mechanics, but with much of the tactical edge softened up to leave behind a simpler experience. Mors, Alester (and the extra party members who join them from time to time) are able to draw on the skills selected by the player upon levelling up, slot them into a line-up of upcoming attacks and then wait for them to come up.

These fights end up feeling, for all the gruesome detail of the occasional finishing move, weirdly bloodless. Queuing up attacks and taking hits from enemies is robotic, the sound and animations never providing the sense that the combatants are actually engaged in any kind of real battle. The fights are all swishes and tinny sound effects, mannequins batting at one another until a life bar depletes and one of them falls down. The character customization that forms the backbone of this experience, though, is much better.

Equipping items and allocating skill points is all pretty standard RPG stuff — choose whether to make your character a giant bruiser, agile backstabber, ranged archer or some combination of the above — but the rock-paper-scissors balancing act of choosing the right weapon to go up against an enemy's armour or choosing to give characters perks that must be balanced with handicaps (earn an extra skill point when levelling up, but sacrifice the ability to regain stamina for instance) adds a good deal to a mostly unimpressive setup.

When players aren't engaged in managing character stats and fighting opponents the story progresses through exposition sequences. The dialogue in these segments is mostly pretty awful and the voices, despite the occasional actor who tries her/his best to sell the clumsy lines, do nothing to improve on this. While something like this could be more easily overlooked in a game based less on (often lengthy) conversations between a handful of characters, *Game of Thrones'* dependency on cutscenes to further its story makes the subpar writing and acting hard to swallow. Static camera angles and unimpressive scenery only exacerbate this problem.

These failing are truly unfortunate, undercutting what is actually a really good plot. Unevenly written and awkwardly paced as it may be, *Game of Thrones* becomes absorbing once it finds its pace. The beginning is extremely slow and does very little to put its narrative hooks into players, but after the first few hours some of the apparent aimlessness of the early chapters begins to develop into a compelling tale that goes a long way toward compensating for the limp combat and extremely limited exploration on hand. It is never so good that it matches the level of narrative propulsion of Martin's books or the HBO series, but Cyanide has done a fantastic job of crafting a story that feels true to the world.

The ability to help determine the outcome of aspects of the story through a conversation choice mechanic (again, taking heavy inspiration from BioWare's *Dragon Age* and/or *Mass Effect*) adds a layer of depth to this as well. Picking what the player feels to be the appropriate answer, interjection or, in certain cases, life-altering decision helps to give the story an extra dimension that pays off with variable outcomes as the story progresses. Deciding to spare the life of a newly repentant mercenary or siding with one playable character's viewpoint over another's can greatly alter aspects of the narrative or gameplay over time, making *Game of Thrones* feel more organic than it otherwise would be.

A good story and satisfying game mechanics often make up for poor visuals, but *Game of Thrones'* aesthetic can, at times, actively hurt both of these areas. The aesthetic is an extremely mixed bag, certain aspects of the game obviously having received much more attention and care than others. Lacklustre environment design, atrocious looking characters and an ugly user interface butt heads with strong armour and weapon detailing and a vibrant colour palette, ultimately leaving a bad impression. That this uneven aesthetic is coupled with technical shortcomings — marionette-like animations, dead eyes and unnatural body language, frequent glitches like clipping through doors — only furthers this problem.

All of it works to obscure what could have been something interesting. There is, after all, a pretty good game to be found here, but Cyanide simply asks players to extend more than an appropriate amount of goodwill in order to find it. This is the issue that plagues the entire production. A solid plot is hidden beneath layers of bad writing and voice acting; a decent visual style is covered by technical shortcomings; a fun character customization system is overshadowed by insubstantial combat: the whole thing ends up feeling like an unfortunate matryoshka doll, ugly wooden exteriors hiding a pretty interior that very few are likely to be willing to fully unnest and discover.

Fans of the source material may be interested to play through *Game of Thrones* at a reduced price, likely sticking it out until it gets interesting simply due to the cheap thrill of interacting with familiar settings and characters, but others will likely be far too put off by the games' myriad problems to progress far enough to discover its strengths. C&G

An ambitious project, but one that ultimately fails to live up to its source material

SteelSeries Diablo III Headset

REVIEW BY: Brendan Frye

Output: USB **Cord:** 6.5 feet **Manufacturer:** SteelSeries **Price:** $119.99 CND

95/100

SteelSeries, with the *Diablo III* products, have made a series of quality accessories that are not only molded after the game but are also superb products for any fan. The *Diablo* Headset is an example of this. It's built with a 50 mm driver, leather ear cups, a braided nylon cord and a retractable microphone, all features you would expect on a premium headset.

The first impressive aspect of the headset is the overall build quality. It looks like it is right from the fiction of *Diablo*, with dark molded plastic, configurable red glowing lights the signature "III" for *Diablo* and a colour braided Nylon cord. It also feels sturdy. All the parts of the headset feel like they are built to last. Much like all SteelSeries lines of products, time was spent not only ensuing they look good but are comfortable to wear. Despite the size, they are easy to wear for long play sessions. This critic spent the entire review process of *Diablo III* using the headset and there was little to no discomfort. It feels better than many high end headphones that are out there, due to the lightness, and proper head support. It makes for a comfortable fit that ensures sound comes though clear.

The sound is where the headset truly shines. The 50 mm driver can pump sound out loud and clear as required. With games like *Diablo*, the sound immerses the player in the game world and allows the entire story to come through with dialogue and music. A bad set of headphones or speakers can diminish this play experience. From the dark sounds of demons, to the dialogue of the characters and the haunting musical score they all came though clear and rich. There was no distortion even on higher volumes and only a slight sense that the left ear was more dominant over the right on lower volumes.

The microphone is another nice addition. It is not as obtrusive as other comparable products, discreetly resting in the left side and extending when required. The sound quality on this microphone was also of surprising. It sounded clear in all chat programs tested, including Skype, and little loss was heard on the receiving end even when talking at lower volumes. These could easily be used as great setup for chatting in addition to game sessions - that is if the gamer friendly look can be disregarded.

The headset relies on a USB connection so which might be a sticking point for some. If the USB ports on your gaming rig demand a premium due to the number of devices plugged in - this could pose a concern, but this does allow for clear sound and the illumination that is present on the headsets. This illumination is controlled by the companion software; this software allows you to change the equalizer in addition to changing the way the illumination works. It can go from a constant pulse, to glow, to a sound based oscillation that is rather fun to watch. The software is *Diablo* themed so everything appears as if it could be from the game world. This is a nice touch although feels a little silly when being used on a work computer. It would have been nice to allow for a simple skin but this is a minor gripe.

The Diablo Headset from SteelSeries is a truly premium product that is well worth the $119 it goes for. The sound is clear and the microphone works very well. It has a great weight and overall feel. If you are in the market for a new headset or just looking for something to go along with your *Diablo* obsession this is a great product that's hard to passup. C&G

SteelSeries Diablo III Mouse

REVIEW BY: Brendan Frye

SYSTEM: PC **Manufacturer:** SteelSeries **Price:** $69.99 CND

92/100

The Diablo mouse is a great example of an aggressively licensed product that is still a must own gadget. Much like the *Diablo* Headset, SteelSeries has constructed a mouse that looks like it was wrenched straight from the world of *Diablo*. It is dark, with a glow that gives the feeling that something evil lives within the mouse. The mouse itself is light yet feels good in the hand, it's sturdy and the braided nylon cord ensures it not only does not get tangled but that it will not suffer from many cord related issues. It has an easy DPI button that allows quick toggling to a max of 5000 counts per inch. The DPI switch is smartly placed, since it is hard to accidently hit during avid gaming sessions.

The scroll wheel is another nice touch. It looks like it was forged from rock, still glowing from the heat. It is easy to use and the fact it looks stunning is an example of the care that went into the design of the mouse. This mouse is made for *Diablo III* making all the buttons on it perfectly placed and easy to assign to different aspects of the game. Depending on what way the mouse is held some buttons may be harder to reach. But since these are easily adjusted that makes them ideal for secondary spells or abilities with the easy to reach ones perfect for primary functions.

The mouse is supposed to allow for 10 million clicks per switch making it much higher than other comparable mice. When playing *Diablo* this feels like it makes a difference. The game responded very quickly to the input given by the mouse allowing for actions to be performed quickly with little lag or issue. Games such as *StarCraft* would also benefit from a mouse with this level of ability so it is an investment that is not restricted to one game.

The mouse not only looks great, the feel of the mouse is equally well suited to longer play sessions. It has a smooth feel that is easy on the hands and the design allows for use with right or left handed gamers. It felt comfortable for use in everyday situations (Windows, Word, etc.) making it an ideal replacement for the aging mouse that may be at your desk.

The Diablo Mouse from SteelSeries is a high quality mouse that is built for the hardcore *Diablo* player, but it fits comfortably at the side of anyone looking to upgrade. It is fast, fluid and great to look at. From the build quality to the design, this is a mouse that will satisfy even the most critical of gamers. A must own mouse that should sit next to your keyboard for years to come. CGG

You might know **Joshua**. He loves video games, and he owns enough to know they're not all meant for kids. That's why he reminds his friends (at least the ones that have kids) that they all have big black letters on the box to help parents find the ones that are best for their families.

You can learn about those ratings at **ESRB.org.**

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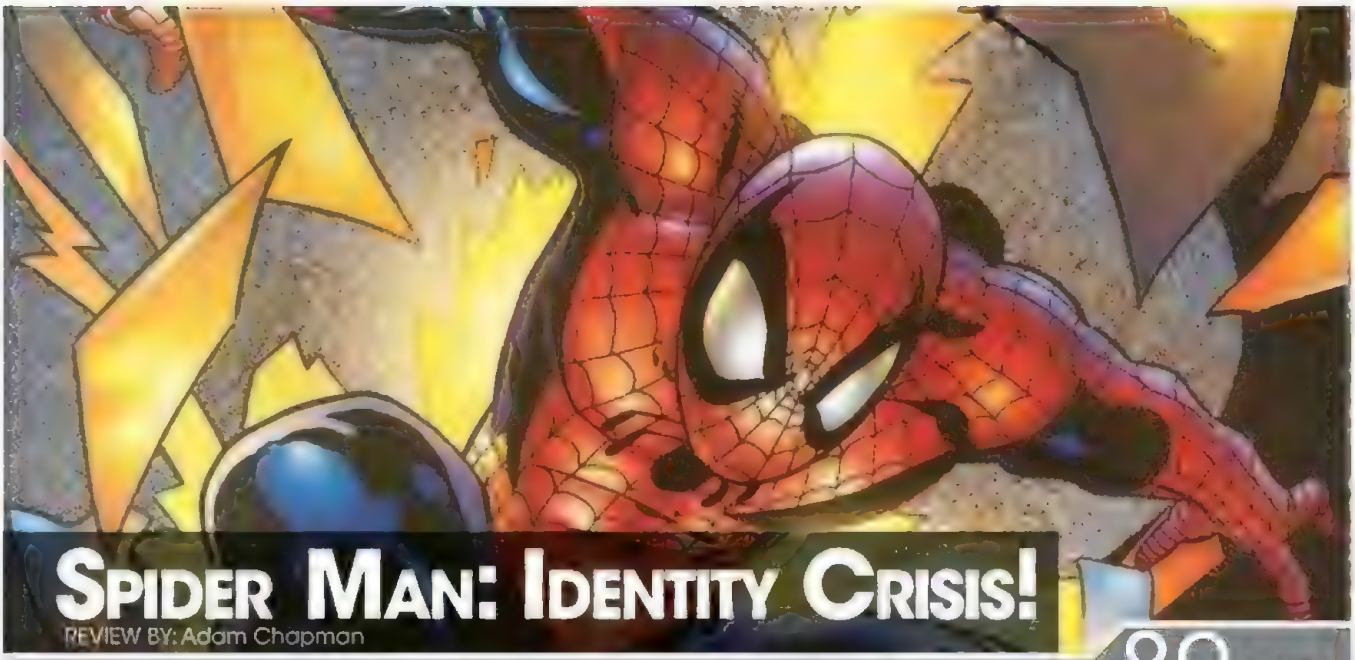

Spider Man: Identity Crisis!

REVIEW BY: Adam Chapman

Publisher: Marvel Comics **Released:** May 23, 2012 **Price:** $27.99 CND

80/100

Six years before DC Comics released their successful *Identity Crisis* mini-series, Marvel Comics did their own story line called *Identity Crisis*, which ran through the four monthly *Spider-Man* titles. The storyline came out of *Spider-Hunt*, in which a low-level criminal named Joey Z. was found dead, with all clues leading to Spider-Man as the murderer, because of a web-like substance found in the man`s lungs. As a result, Norman Osborn put a huge bounty on Spider-Man's head, which attracted numerous bounty hunters to New York City to try and cash in. Incidentally, that storyline is set to be reprinted next month as *Spider-Man: Spider-Hunt*. That storyline didn't end with Spider-Man being cleared or exonerated, as instead it ended with Spider-Man still being public enemy number one. The premise behind *Identity Crisis* is a fun and simple one: if Spider-Man can't show his face in public, how else can Peter Parker honour his great responsibility? By taking on four new identities, while simultaneously trying to figure out how to clear Spider-Man of the crimes for which he is accused. This story came at an interesting point in Spider-Man's history, as readership was down after the *Clone Saga*, which had recently concluded just over a year earlier. I've always felt that the period immediately after the *Clone Saga* was actually quite a fun one, with some great talent on the books, telling fun stories that got back to the basics of who Spider-Man is. The core premise of this storyline and *Spider-Hunt* before it was to go back to the days when Spider-Man was thought of as a public menace, with cops and civilians not knowing what to think about him, and alternatively loving and hating him. At first blush, the storyline looks aesthetically similar to *Reign of the Supermen*, when various new heroes showed up on the scene saying they were Superman, but with this storyline all the new heroes actually were Spider-Man, but pretending that he was these other heroes instead. It's an inverted take on what *Reign of the Supermen* ended up doing.

The issues collected in this title are *Amazing Spider-Man #434-435*, *Sensational Spider-Man #27-28*, *Spider-Man #91-92* and *Spectacular Spider-Man #257-258*. This period in *Spider-Man* history is criminally underrated, with some great stories being told, and by some great creators. Norman Osborn was back at large, operating as a businessman and having seemingly distanced himself publicly from being the Green Goblin. *Sensational Spider-Man*, by Todd DeZago and Mike Wieringo, focused on Peter Parker as the Hornet, a hero who flew thanks to a harness created by Hobie Brown, The Prowler. He took on The Looter and The Vulture in his two appearances, although after his fight with the Vulture Norman Osborn managed to figure out that the Hornet was in fact his old enemy Spider-Man. Over in *Amazing Spider-Man*, Tom DeFalco and Joe Bennett told the adventure of Ricochet, who wasn't quite a hero and more of a mercenary, as he allied himself with Delilah to get closer to learning more about the deadly Black Tarantula, who had recently beaten Spider-Man badly during Spider-Hunt. Over in *Peter Parker: Spider-Man*, Howard Mackie and John Romita Jr. told the story of the shadowy Dusk, who was seemingly more involved with the criminal element, as he allied himself with The Trapster, who was being targeted for death. It was in this book that Spider-Man got exonerated for the death of Joey Z., as it was The Trapster who was responsible for the murder while working for Norman Osborn, who was then trying to have him killed by hired assassins. And in *Spectacular Spider-Man* Glenn Greenberg and

Luke Ross tackled the adventures of Prodigy, a hero in the Superman mold, as he fought Jack O'Lantern and Conundrum.

Part of what makes this storyline so much fun is seeing Peter Parker try out these new identities, exploring different facets of his own personality. Pieces of who Spider-Man is can be found in each of these four identities, blown up into becoming a primary character trait in each hero. The artwork on all four books was fantastic, and well-suited to telling the stories that the title's writers wanted to tell. Mike Wieringo brings a great deal of energy to his portrayal of Hornet, with Joe Bennett making the more action-oriented Ricochet pop on the page. The best artwork in the collection is John Romita Jr.'s, as he absolutely nails Dusk. Romita's artwork in this period was quite dark and moody, with his characters not being as blocky as they had been in the early nineties. The story of Dusk works as well as it does because of how dark and moody the artwork is, while still boasting strong storytelling skills throughout. The adventures of Dusk and Trapster are far more enjoyable, both in the writing and the artwork, than they have any right to be, and that's thanks to Mackie and Romita Jr., respectively.

Months after this storyline, the identities which Peter Parker used in this storyline would be used for a short-lived ongoing comic called *Slingers*, as the four identities were given to four youngsters who became fledgling heroes in their own right. The series didn't last past a year, but became a cult-favourite with a passionate fanbase, leading to future appearances by these characters in disparate places of the years. Hornet was killed off-panel during Mark Millar/John Romita Jr.'s Wolverine: Enemy of the State storyline, Ricochet made appearances in Runaways and Loners, Dusk showed up during the Ms. Marvel series, and Prodigy showed up in *Civil War: Frontline*, *Avengers: Initiative* and *Fear Itself: Youth in Revolt*. As a fan of these identities and of the *Slingers*, I can only hope that the reprinting of this storyline is going to lead to a reprinting of the short-lived *Slingers* ongoing series. If you enjoy this collection, you should also seek out next month's *Spider-Man: Spider-Hunt*, as it tells the story which leads directly into this one. C&G

Choker Vol. 1

REVIEW BY: Adam Chapman

Publisher: Image Comics Released: May/09/2012 Price: $16.99 CAD

70 / 100

For the past few years I've read predominantly comics from the Big Two comic publishers, Marvel and DC, and haven't read much from the other comic publishers out there, such as Image Comics. *Choker* is a unique book, both in the artwork and the way in which the story is told, and is definitely in a darker vein than I would typically associate Image Comics' books with. It's also a book that I think benefits greatly from being read as part of a collected edition, as I'm not so sure it would read nearly as well if there was a month or two gap in between issues.

The story in this book is deceptively simple, as ex-cop Johnny "Choker" Jackson, now a private eye, is called in by the Chief of Police to do a special job, which involves tracking down a notorious narcotics traffickWer who was originally collared by Jackson back when he was a cop. Jackson hates his life since being kicked off the force, and wants nothing more than to return to his old life, so he takes the gig reluctantly, with not much choice in the matter afforded to him. Ben McCool takes the simple premise and really delves into the potential in the idea, as he builds a rich tapestry that is Shotgun City, as well as its history and problems. McCool puts more into building up the overall surroundings that Jackson lives in than he needs to, but it's to his credit because of how rich he makes the world around Jackson. The script is hard-boiled fiction, mixing together a variety of different genres to come up with a very unique mixture, which oscillates between crime fiction, noir, and horror fiction, in alternating sequences. The story takes a variety of twists and turns, and builds up a few great leading characters, and by the end Seaton and Jackson were almost a partnership reminiscent of *Lethal Weapon*. When the book opened, and showed Seaton and Jackson together, I had no idea how McCool would build their working relationship, and by the end, I really liked seeing these two characters together, as their exchanges really popped off the page. Officer Walker is also a great fleshed out character, and I hope that if and when McCool returns to these characters for another *Choker* story that she figures prominently in the story, as her wit and utter lack of charm made her a very engaging presence.

The artwork in this series is provided by Templesmith, and is a very unique visual experience. At times, the gritty darkness of the artwork is a perfect complement to McCool's hard-boiled script, and the world of Shotgun City really comes to life through his artwork. That being said, there were also a lot of times when some of the action wasn't all that clear to make out, or when it was easy to confuse which character you were looking at, or who was supposed to be who. Overall, the artwork, while unique and strong in most parts, lacked a certain level of consistency. The tone of the book was consistent, but as previously mentioned, it was at times to figure out what was actually happening, and that's a pretty major mark against the artwork, when dealing in such a visual-dependant medium. Sadly, the overall score for the book would have been higher had the artwork been a bit stronger, clearer, and more consistent.

Choker was a pretty enjoyable read all-told, but the biggest indicator here is that by the end, I really wanted to see what comes next for the characters of Jackson and Seaton. The story here was a great origin story for their working relationship and friendship, to set them up for careers within the police department, and now I want to see where they go from here, how they operate, and how they help to clean up the police department, among other areas of city government, in Shotgun City. I'm in for the next round of *Choker* comics, if and when they come to pass. CG

For **Juri**, the big letter on the box is a good start. But sometimes she wants to know more about the games **Sean** and **Maia** want to play. And now she can, **right from her phone**, right from the store.

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The Activity Vol. 1

REVIEW BY: Adam Dias

Publisher: Image Comics Released: June 06, 2012 Price: $12.99 CND

74 / 100

In *The Activity,* Nathan Edmondson and Mitch Gerads tell the story of America's most advanced and most classified special operations group, the Intelligence Support Activity, or ISA for short. Team Omaha, members of ISA, are brought in to sort out or assist in missions that have been botched or have little chance of success, and they wield "bleeding-edge tech" and a host of specialized skill sets to ensure that everything goes off without a hitch. The book is a feast for the eyes, showcasing a gritty, dark world and the writing is well executed and has a rare air of authenticity but Edmondson and Gerads fail to adequately personalize the characters within the book, making it difficult to feel for them in any meaningful way.

If I were to choose one word to describe Edmondson's writing, it would be authentic. The missions that Team Omaha work on are presented with acute detail and, with so much happening, follow a fast pace. Each issue entails a single mission, and the action of each mission comes off feeling somewhat like the heist sequence in a heist movie, fast paced and with the entertainment coming largely from seeing how the different parts come together and how any setbacks are overcome. Edmondson's dialogue is probably his strongest asset, he seamlessly includes an accurate set of jargon and his characters never miss a beat. Often this means that you will have to rely on the context of a few terms to keep up, but you can always turn to the handy glossary at the back of the book if needed. Adding to the realism is the non-english dialogue, which remains within the book untranslated. This adds to the authenticity of the writing and is handled well, never allowed to confuse the reader.

Gerads uses a a array of textured cells to present a gritty and, on the whole, realistic world. The style allows for a surprising amount of detail to be inferred and works well with the subject matter, which takes place in a wide variety of environments and often in the dark. This last point is worth more discussion as the shading is superb, adding a level of depth to the images while evoking a sense of grit and grimness. This style occasionally fails to create a sense of depth however, flattening the characters. Colours in *The Activity* are vibrant and jump out at you, providing the feel of a high-tech spy movie. Additionally, it is clear that intelligent choices were made from page-to-page concerning how the colours of each frame would play off of each other; the palette is rarely the source of any discord. Panel layout is more or less conventional, but on a few occasions there is a playful use of floating frames that allow a closer following of the action. Gerads' art is impressive and urges you onward, complementing Edmondson's pace.

While Edmondson and Gerads both do an excellent job the writing and the artwork fail to really provide any interesting, well developed characters; and in some cases the script and the art actually work against each other. The volume of action within each issue provides little room for Edmondson to develop each member of the team. When combined with Gerads art style, each member becomes more like a cut-out of a soldier than a fully realized character. Attempts are clearly made to allow these characters to flourish, brief encounters with family, and minor emotional experiences are seen, but they always seem a little ham-fisted and are not substantial enough to add any real depth. It is worth noting that this trade represents only the first five issues of an ongoing series, and that as that series continues Edmonson and Gerads will doubtlessly ease into the format and begin to make more noteworthy attempts at characterization, but until then Team Omaha consists largely of toy soldiers.

If you're looking for an action-oriented title, then *The Activity* may be for you, each issue has a fast pace, exciting moments, and is more or less self-contained. But if you're looking for a character-driven story with deep, personal moments, I would look elsewhere. CGM

BATMAN: KNIGHTFALL

REVIEW BY: Adam Chapman

Publisher: DC Comics **Released**: May, 09, 2012 **Price**: $34.00 CND

65/100

With *Dark Knight Rises* getting closer with every day, DC Comics is wisely reprinting the character's first story arc, as well as his most notable, *Knightfall*. This volume reprints the landmark *Knightfall* storyline from 1993, in its entirety, the first time that DC has done so in one volume as opposed to two, as it did in the mid-90s. You can't really beat this kind of value, as you get over 600 pages for just $34.00. This volume reads a lot better than one might expect, as it boasts strong writing and some great ideas which put Batman through the ultimate wringer. The early nineties weren't full of a lot of good stories for characters like Batman and Superman, although there were definitely flashes of brilliance, and this storyline is an example of one of those flashes.

Bane comes to town, and decides to put Batman through the ultimate wringer, to wear him down, before he plans to take him on in person, so that he may break him. To do so, he stages a massive breakout at Arkham Asylum, loosing all of Gotham's worst psychotics back onto the city, forcing Batman to push himself harder than ever before to try and protect his city. As he does so, Jean-Paul Valley trains with Robin, never realizing that soon he will be called upon to don the cape and cowl of Batman when Bruce Wayne is incapacitated. But Jean-Paul Valley is a deeply troubled individual, as a result of his upbringing, and as he pushes himself to be worthy of Bruce Wayne's mantle, he becomes a Batman for the 90s.

Although the writing is fairly strong and mature for the time period, the major downfall to this era of Batman comics is in the artwork. It's fascinating to read this collection, because of how the artwork looks in this collection compared to comics published during this time period by Marvel Comics. The artwork is much more raw, lacking a certain polish, and as much as Aparo's artwork has a classic look to it, it's not always that smooth in its presentation. Graham Nolan's artwork is a standout in this collection, of higher quality than that provided by Aparo. Aparo's artwork lacks a certain tension, as well as a suitable darkness which is hard to put into words. The Arkham breakout should have been a really great artistic moment, but the actual artwork that depicts it is almost laughable.

I'm impressed with DC for putting together such a large collection, I only wish that this volume had been able to do so without sacrificing paper quality in the collection. The paper used is standard paper, instead of glossy paper, which was used in their recent *No Man's Land* trade paperbacks. The use of standard paper only serves to compound some of my issues with the artwork in the collection. But despite the lacklustre artwork and paper quality, this is still a good collection because of the extraordinary value in it, plus some really great stories which are told by the *Batman* writers of this era. It also provides a great introduction to Bane, in his purest form, and collects *Batman: Vengeance of Bane Special #1* which had never before been bundled with reprint collections of *Knightfall*. C&G

BEFORE WATCHMEN MINUTEMEN 1

REVIEW BY: Adam Chapman

Publisher: DC Comics **Released**: June, 06, 2012 **Price**: $3.99 CND

90/100

Although there's no doubt in my mind that none of the *Before Watchmen* series *needed* to happen, I have to admit that Darwyn Cooke knocked this first issue of *Minutemen* right out of the park. To be honest, I can't imagine an artist better suited for this comic than Darwyn Cooke, as his style is pitch-perfect for a comic like this. Whereas *Watchmen* was set in the 1980s, this book is instead focused on the early days of costumed heroes, in the late 1930s. Or rather, it is told from the perspective of Hollis Mason, the first Nite-Owl, as he concludes his infamous memoir Under the Hood, which was frequently referenced throughout the original *Watchmen* mini-series.

This is only the first issue of a six-issue series, and as a result Cooke spends the entirety of this issue introducing readers to the members of the Minutemen, along with a quick origin story showing key events that would eventually lead the various heroes to becoming part of a team later on. On the one hand, this is a very slow-paced issue, because readers are merely introduced to the various team members, but not much is done beyond that, and it's unclear just what the rest of the series will end up looking like, when it all plays out. However, on the other hand Darwyn Cooke's writing and artwork is of such a high-calibre that it's hard to care about the slow progression of the plot, when the overall product is as enjoyable as this issue was. Cooke takes just the right amount of time getting into each character's head, crafting quick vignettes which capture the spirits of the characters starring in them, and showing that they are still the characters that Moore originally created back in the 1980s. There's a certain authenticity in terms of how the characters are presented, and the artwork is absolutely perfect in capturing an old-school funny book feel for these characters.

Although the primary audience this book is being targeted towards is comprised of fans of the original *Watchmen* series, this book also does a great job of being completely accessible to readers who may have never before read or heard of *Watchmen*. They aren't the primary audience, obviously, as this book and the others that are coming out depend on the *Watchmen* name for orders, and yet it should manage to capture their attention as well. If you're familiar with Watchmen, there are numerous touches which work better here because you're aware of how these characters end up, and what fates are awaiting all of them, making the narrative that much more compelling. Cooke's artwork captures the naivety of the golden age absurdly well, as the book is filled with a delightful innocence, despite the severity and seriousness of the Comedian's story, amongst others. The book almost feels more tragic as a result, because despite the happy-go-lucky fun look of this book, and the innocence it conveys, there's a very dark future ahead of all these characters.

The question of whether or not this series was or is necessary is pretty moot by this point, as the *Before Watchmen* books have officially launched. Personally, regardless of how I feel about that particular question, this book was immensely entertaining and very enjoyable, a true testament to Darwyn Cooke's skill and talent as a writer/artist. Highly Recommended! CGG

Following the ever increasing media coverage that was the E3 2012 hype train, how do you think the reporting on the games industry has changed? I remember a time where the race to get information out didn't exist in the same way it does today and where the articles we read weren't spoon fed to us from pre-E3 media events (ie, Nintendo's self-serving E3 primer?) . I think reporting has suffered. What does CGM think?

- MarathonMan

Reporting for E3 has certainly changed in the 17 years since the event began. The biggest change has been the internet, and the fact that live-blogging means enthusiasts can get news from the show floor within moments of an announcement. Another more recent and important change has been the way that publishers themselves approach the event. Press Conferences in particular now have a much greater measure of control being exerted by the publishers, with even big media outlets agreeing to stream a broadcast orchestrated by the publishers, rather than rely on their own reporting.

In that sense, I wouldn't necessarily say that reporting has suffered. At least, not for the hardcore gamer that follows the events with interest, as any seasoned media outlet—including our own—is liable to ask questions when things don't feel kosher. Many, for example, are pointing out Nintendo's lack of presenting hard technical specifications for the upcoming Wii U, and despite the multiple camera angles that Sony and Microsoft provided to outlets agreeing to use their broadcast, few reporters are saying either company had a fantastic showing this year.

The big loser is, I think, the casual audience. They don't do their homework, so they accept what the press conferences tell them as gospel because they don't know any better. In that sense, for the general audience, reporting on E3 *has* suffered somewhat. But for the traditional, hardcore gamer, there's still an acceptable signal to noise ratio if you know where to look.

Are you guys at Comics & Gaming Magazine ready for the next generation? I am. I'm already hungry for what's next. Don't get me wrong, there is certainly tons of life left in the Xbox, Wii and PS3, but where is the excitement without progression?

- Garuda Wings

Actually the answer for many of us might be, "No." There's no getting around that we're in the twilight of the current console generation, so thinking in next-gen terms is unavoidable. But there's still a fair amount of juice to be squeezed from the current consoles, as seen in some impressive titles like *Beyond: Two Souls* and *The Last of Us*. Graphics have gotten to the point where they already look pretty damn good, and if that's how you measure the entertainment factor of a system, then we're headed for a ceiling in two or three more console generations where games likely can't look any better.

There's also a ton of old games still available that are fun to play and might not have gotten proper playtime during the traditional *Call of Duty* crush in November, or even the flood of games in February and March. And then there's the inevitable drop in the cost of PC components that finally makes it possible to play all those top tier games from a few years ago at maximum settings with no compromise.

That's not to say that the future isn't an interesting place. But the present still has a lot going for it. C&G

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